

Halo: Only the Bold

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Summary: In 2546, just after Operation: TORPEDO, ONI has decided to send two Prowler-class ships, Nagamo and Apocolypso, to investigate a slipspace anomaly. With very limited resources, captains Galin Thorm and Amanda Greene must face overwhelming odds to secure the safety of the UNSC. At any cost. *Several "steamy" scenes; read with caution*

1. Chapter 1

****Halo: Only the Bold ****

Chapter 1

_12 July 2546

>Location Unknown
UNSC Nagamo,_ Prowler-_class_

Inside the central security conference room, the report remained suspended in the air between the two officers. The title header "Operation: TORPEDO" flickered in a two-sided holoform before Captain Galin Thorm advanced the pages of data through the complete report. Seated across from him, Lieutenant Kandis Jokling stirred in her seat. With the final page displaying the commentary of the operation's ONI Lead, Galin felt his stomach grow cold from the facts.

_296 Spartans-dead. _It was almost too many to comprehend.

"What a waste," Kandis muttered, slowly rising out of her chair. "All of those Spartans, all of the equipment . . . and for what, to slow the Covenant Front in one Sector?"

Galin's brow furrowed. "The destruction of the refinery will set the Covenant back months. We'll use that time wisely to build up our defenses or evacuate the systems on that vector."

Kandis' blue eyes flashed a stare at Galin as she started pacing. Her

pale skin contrasted her long black ponytail swaying with her short steps. "And then what? We try to take potshots at them, hoping they don't find Reach or Earth or-"

"-I know, Kandis," Galin said wearily. His eyes grazed over the projected losses for either side and the numbers didn't help him feel any better for the sacrifice of those Spartans. "That's why HIGHCOM sent us this report. If we can figure out ways to halt the Covenant's progress, we might find ways to stop them altogether." Galin ran a hand over his face and scratched at his beard before folding his hands across his chest. "Call it motivation."

She paused briefly before coming around to his side of the conference room and leaned against the table, facing him. Kandis looked down into his deep brown eyes and she forced a smile. "We both know we're in desperate times. Humanity is running on a lot more than motivation right now."

Galin returned her smile. "Self-preservation, for one. Duty. Honor . . ." His eyes flickered to the report and he knew the bold red number of 296 would be forever burned in his memory. "Sacrifice."

Kandis reached out and took his hand in hers. "Then let's make sure we do our part."

He pulled her closer and their lips met. The softness of her lips reminded Galin of the first time he met Kandis many months ago. She was a bright, young ONI Analyst assigned to Nagamo to round out his staff, but he soon found her knack for troubleshooting-and troublemaking-a two-sided lure of his affections. Kandis Jokling was all sweetness underneath a hardened exterior.

Though nearly 15 years apart in age, they complimented each other well. Galin was almost 40 and his dark skin was beginning to wrinkle around his eyes more and more each day. Unlike most ship captains in the UNSC, Galin had purposely kept himself in top physical shape, while Kandis was still in the twilight of her youth and still had a gymnast's physique. Galin wanted to wrap her in his arms, but a ping on the center console pulled him away from their kiss.

Kandis sighed and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before walking around to her previous seat. Galin smoothed over his uniform and straightened in his chair. "This is Captain Thorm."

"Captain," the young male voice said over the comm. "We're about to arrive in the Epsilon Eridani System."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Galin quickly stood, catching a puzzled look on Kandis' face. "We're going to Emerald Cove," he explained.

Kandis nodded, but let a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. "So, back to work?" She lowered her head and crossed over to him, running her hands against the back of the chairs playfully.

Galin knew her body language all too well and held up his hands in quiet, gentle protest. "Another time, Kandis."

"There won't always be another time," she whispered, repeating her go-to saying that had kept Galin from returning to his quarters alone

many times in the past. But she stopped her advance and she nodded again. "I know; now's not the best time." She raised a slender eyebrow. "Later?"

"Of course." Their relationship was completely against ONI regulation and it was highly possible that his 'separation' to his wife Heather back on Reach would be finalized into a legal divorce as soon as he came in to dry dock, but Kandis . . . _She has been worth the risk_. He gave her a quick kiss and started for the door.

"What are we doing at Emerald Cove?" Kandis asked, already snapping back into a professional, official manner.

He keyed the door open with his access code and flashed a smile. "Visiting an old friend."

* * *

><p>On the bridge of Nagamo, Galin took his seat in the command chair and nodded to the shipboard artificial intelligence, Jovan, which stood on his pedestal to the right of the Captain. "Status?"

Jovan, who chose to display his avatar in the manner of a cultured professor who was constantly looking down his nose, stood with hands collected on his rotund belly. "The ship is running in full Stealth Mode, and we'll be arriving . . . " The blackness of Slipspace reverted into a star field that was largely consumed with a green and blue planet dead ahead. " . . . Now."

Galin didn't have to order his crew about the usual arrival protocol and the bridge was soon filled with updates. "No Covenant transmissions detected." "No other ships in the area." "Our exit vector is clear."

Jovan tilted his head slightly. "Incoming signal, Captain. It's coming from the far side of the planet." He looked up. "It matches ONI profile."

Motioning with his hand, Galin nodded to the communications officer. There was a burst of static before a female voice spoke. "This is the UNSC _Apocolypso_, Captain Amanda Greene, hailing UNSC _Nagamo_."

Galin activated the comm on his command chair's arm. "This is Captain Galin Thorm. Good to hear from you again, Greene. It has been too long." Out of the corner of his eye, he spied Kandis quickly glance over in his direction from her station along the portside consoles. "Our initial scans show the system to be clean, but I assume you've had more time to sweep the area."

"That's affirmative. We're in the clear, though I would recommend we stay Silent for the duration." Greene paused before adding, "if you could sync your AI to mine, we could begin docking maneuvers."

His eyebrows rose slightly. AI synchronization was really only reserved for Orbital Platforms or other, larger ships that had higher-end AIs with the capabilities to temporarily link their processes with other AIs. "ONI hasn't spared any expense with your ship's upgrades, have they?"

"Comes with too many faithful years of service," Greene gloated.
"Something you're unfamiliar with."

Galin laughed lightly. "See you soon. Thorm out." He nodded to Jovan.
"If you may."

The _proowler_-class ship began a slow rotation to starboard and muffled thuds could be heard from the docking collar being extended. It would latch onto _Apcolypso_'s collar and Greene's own AI would pressurize the passageway.

* * *

><p>As customary, Galin stood halfway into the joined collars, with Kandis two steps behind and to his right, and greeted Captain Greene with a smile and a handshake. Greene was about as plain as a woman could look, which was one of the reasons ONI selected her for training. Her dirty-blond hair could be tucked up underneath her cap or draped over her broad shoulders, while her complexion was light enough to take on the hue of any light that was shone upon her. She was fit, but not overly muscular.<p>

"This is Lieutenant Kandis Jokling, ONI Analyst," Galin introduced. As the two women greeted each other, Galin could tell that underneath Kandis' smile was suspicious jealousy.

Greene motioned to the other, younger woman to join her at her side. "This is Ensign Rolf Sorenson. She's still getting her feet wet," Greene added with an abbreviated smile.

Galin nodded to the petite, blonde woman. Her skin was light, her face freckled, and Galin would place her age as barely out of her teens. Her forced expression spoke of someone on her first assignment, longing for the creature comforts of home. "Pleased to meet you."

"Would you like to see the new and improved _Apocolypso_?" Greene asked.

The four of them traveled down the docking collar and into the darkened interior of the ship. _Apocolypso_ was identical to _Nagamo_ in layout, but the former had had many recent retrofits, as marked by the patchwork of cables running along the corridors' ceilings. Greene gave a brief tour, starting with the bridge and ending with the central conference room, and Galin was quite impressed.

"It is just me, or are you carrying half the crew Nagamo has?" he asked, while taking a seat across from Greene.

"We are running at 53 crewmen right now," she conceded. "Thanks mostly in part to Melissa, our new AI."

The yellow avatar of a tall, slender woman with long flowing hair appeared on a pedestal on the right side of the large viewscreen at the head of the table. Melissa gave a polite bow. "Captain Greene is too kind."

She merely smiled. "Yes, well," Greene said, more to fill in the

awkward gap between small talk and business. "I'm afraid our planned debriefing will have to be put on hold. We received a Slipstream Packet from Reach while we were waiting for your arrival." She nodded to Sorenson who pulled out a datapad and linked it to the viewscreen. A few static images flashed up on the screen, mostly containing cropped areas of destruction and rubble. "I'm sure by now you've read the Operation: TORPEDO report?"

"We have," Galin said soberly.

"Then you know how dire the situation is becoming." Greene nodded to Sorenson again, and the holo-projector at the center of the table lit up to display a view of the know galaxy. The view zoomed in on a portion of space between their current location and Reach. A glowing red dot pulsed into existence marked with a triangle of coordinates. "A fellow Prowler-class ship, Raven's Call, was returning to Reach for maintenance on their stealth systems when it caught a slipspace disruption in an uninhabited system."

The holographic image showed the plotted course of Raven's Call along with the signals approximate origin. Galin leaned forward. "That's nowhere near any UNSC outpost or even an Insurrectionist base."

"Raven's Call wasn't able to completely lock on to the source and Captain Ongro didn't want to risk being detected."

"So we have no idea what it is?" Kandis asked a little too bluntly. "It could have been cosmic radiation bouncing off the local star. If Ongro's stealth systems were malfunctioning, his sensor could have as well."

"I doubt it," Sorenson said apologetically. "It was a wide spectrum burst, not a solid wavelength. From that data Melissa and I can only speculate that it might be from a slipspace-capable ship attempting to enter the Slipstream but apparently failed to do so."

Greene sighed. "Raven's Call was the only ONI ship to be operating in the area, so we know it's not one of ours."

"Are you sure this isn't some Spartan training exercise?" Kandis asked more gently this time.

Green shook her head. "No. That system is only on the star charts for navigation purposes. There's no inhabitable place to set up shop."

"Which doesn't mean the Innies haven't moved in," Galin pointed out. "So what are our orders from HIGHCOM?"

Greene blinked her hazel eyes. "My orders are to head to the contact zone and hold station. Your orders are to rendezvous with the Frigate Teveden and pick up some new . . . personnel."

"Personnel?"

Sorenson handed Kandis a pair of datacards as Greene nodded. "The details are in the files; I'll let you be the judge of them privately." She sighed wearily. "I think the Prowler Corps has us

spread too thin, and my concern is that ONI wants us to tackle this with minimal resources on our own." Greene frowned. "I don't know what's waiting for us, but as soon as you pick up your new additions, _Nagamo_ is to join us at the target system."

"I'll send Jovan the rally coordinates," Melissa put in.

Captain Greene's shoulders slackened. "We'll recon the area and hopefully have enough data for a more in-depth analysis when you arrive."

Galin chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, mulling over the information. It wasn't a lot to go on, but nothing _Nagamo_ set out to recon ever had overwhelming amounts of datapackets waiting in the message queue. _A mystery ship, ONI looking to salve its own wounds from the loss of 296 Spartans, a few 'classified' personnel . . . I guess it's only a few degrees off our regular vector._

He quickly stood, suddenly feeling a sense of urgency about the mission. "Then we should be going." He was pleased to find Kandis at his side before he got his words completely out. "Be careful out there, Amanda."

Greene rose and Sorenson mirrored Kandis' position. "You too, Galin." She opened her mouth as if to say more, but she merely nodded and threw a quick salute.

Galin returned it swiftly and headed back towards the docking collar. Once they were inside the conjoined passageway Kandis came alongside Galin. Detecting her mood, he spoke before she had a chance to ask. "Greene and I go way back," he said with a partial sigh. "I've known her since officer training school and we're _just _friends."

Kandis was silent until they both were back aboard _Nagamo_. As Jovan sealed the blast door and began to retract the docking collar, she turned to face Galin. "I'll upload the data to Jovan and get started on the analysis," she said plainly, without any trace of emotion. She spun on her heel and headed aft.

Galin breathed a heavy sigh and was about to reach out his hand to stop her, but a pair of techs stepped into the hallway a dozen meters down and he knew he had to be discreet. He watched as Kandis didn't bother moving or slow down and the techs hastily parted to either side of the hallway to avoid a collision. She was upset, that much he had gathered, but it would pass.

The tech on the left raised an eyebrow when they came to a stop in front of the Captain. "How'd things go, sir?"

Galin paused for a moment, wondering if the tech was referring to Kandis or the meeting with Greene. Shaking his head to clear his mind, Galin looked at the man. "Like always. As soon as we're clear we're outbound for another rendezvous." He turned and started for the bridge.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

She hated every minute of the shuttle ride up to Nagamo. Nicole-458 refused to strap herself into her seat and decided to ride out the thick atmosphere of the moon by standing up in the hold of the shuttle. The ship bucked and rocked, but she held on to the overhead crossbeam with one hand easily. At least this is kind of a challenge. Nicole wondered if ONI seemed to have made it their goal to keep her from real combat. Most of her assignments had been mop-up duties or Marine babysitting. She rarely saw her fellow Spartans, only hearing of their heroic tales from others, and she doubted this new mission would be anything worth sharing with them.

Behind her, an older man securely strapped into his seat mumbled something in a language she didn't understand. It sounded bitter . . . and old. He was a professor of some kind, though she really didn't care. All he had kept saying to the captain of Teveden was how he couldn't leave Reach, but the UNSC frigate left anyway, making a slipspace jump to some remote system.

She sighed. With little information revealed, the frigate was called back to Reach for some other "important" mission and dropped both her and the professor off on a forest moon. They had waited at the small UNSC outpost for only a day before Nagamo arrived, and now the silver-haired man was beginning to grumble like he did back on Teveden.

The shuttle's shaking abruptly ceased as they broke away from the moon, and Nicole turned to the cockpit's forward viewport. Outside the stars shifted as the pilot vectored on a heading towards a distant dark shape that could only be Nagamo. Even from the distance, Nicole could make out the angular outline of the prowler-class vessel. It was nothing special. She had been on several before.

The pilot steered the shuttle to dock alongside the larger ship. With little finesse, the sounds of metal scrapping against metal made the professor grunt in protest. The docking maneuver complete, the side door of the shuttle opened up to a dark interior and two smiling faces. A dark-skinned man, even darker than Nicole's own tone, stood proudly while the slightly shorter, much paler woman stood uneasily at his side, suggesting she'd rather not be present despite her expression. In complete contrast, the professor angrily unbuckled his restraints and quickly marched over to the opened door.

"I demand to know why I am being held against my will," he said without preamble.

Nicole was surprised to see the two Nagamo officers hold their expressions. "Dr. Laszlo Sorvad, I presume? My apologies for the inconvenience of this meeting."

The professor's chin rose and Nicole imagined his expression was one of puzzlement. "Yes, well, I need some answers," he said a bit more calmly.

"And you shall have them." The captain looked up at Nicole with tension forming around his eyes, almost as if he were hiding some distant painful memory. "Spartan-458, welcome aboard Nagamo."

She wanted to point out that she had not officially stepped onto the prowler-class ship, but nodded anyway. There was no need to openly

defy a ship's captain over something so menial. Nicole then brushed past Sorvad and ducked down the docking collar, only to turn back to see the professor pausing.

Sorvad seemed to be locked in a stare that went back and forth between the two officers until the captain stepped aside, motioning the civilian professor. "Please, Dr. Sorvad. We are on a tight schedule and I don't wish to arrive late."

"Late to where?" Sorvad asked with narrowed eyes.

The female officer folded her arms across her chest. "Doctor, if you don't come aboard now we'll have security force you toâ€" "

The captain held up his hand to forestall her rant. "We are going to investigate a slipspace anomaly. I have a good friend who is waiting for us to arrive with the both of you." He glanced at Nicole then back to Sorvad. "With your expertise and this Spartan's combat skills, I should hope we can handle the situation before it can get out of hand." While his voice was very much under control, it took on an edge of challenge. "If you'd like to stay here, the next slipspace-capable ship won't be arriving for another six months, though I'm sure you can learn to barter for food and supplies with the dozen crewmen stationed on the moon's outpost."

Nicole smiled behind her visor. _I like this captain._

Sorvad worked his jaw, keeping himself under rigid control. He took one last look at the shuttle's interior then marched past the two officers, grumbling again in his native tongue. When he stepped sideways past Nicole she looked back at the officers and the female just shook her head.

The captain straightened up. "Lieutenant Jokling, would you see Spartan-458 off to her quarters while I catch up to the Professor?"

"Yes, Captain Thorm." Jokling motioned with her hand and the two women headed aft.

Their short walk took them deeper into the ship and just past the crewmen's main barracks. Jokling wasn't much for talking or elaborating on this slipspace anomaly investigation. But that was okay. Nicole had learned long ago that, when in her armor, the least amount of words she spoke, the more she was left alone.

Her room was small, but it contained all she would need for the duration of her stay. The accoutrements, whether planned before or after they sent word to _Teveden_ to bring her here, were facilitative to a Spartan. She even had a storage locker large enough to place her armor in. _It would do_, she decided. _At least it's bigger than a cryo-pod_.

"Captain's scheduled a briefing in a few hours, but I'd recommend getting as much shut-eye as possible. This trip shouldn't take too long." Jokling seemed to force a smile then left, closing the door behind her.

What a fun bunch. She waited for almost half an hour before exiting her room and pausing in the hallway. She could have easily queried

the shipboard AI for a map of _Nagamo_, but instead she decided to do her own tour of the ship. In the end, it wasn't much different than other _prowler_-class ships. Just more crew than she was used to.

As she walked down the darkened corridors, her mind kept going back to what the captain referred to as a "slipspace anomaly." Images of a UNSC rescue op, an Innies ship blowing out its main drive, and even Covenant ships setting a trap flashed before her mind's eye. Whatever it turned out to be, it would hopefully be something worthy of a Spartan's skills.

When she returned to her quarters to find a message queued up on a datapad left for her, she sighed. The journey would take another day and a half and the captain had decided to delay his meeting until the day of arrival. She wondered if the arguing professor had anything to do with that.

She looked down at the sturdy-looking bed, beckoning her tired mind and body for rest. "Jokling, I think I'll take you up on your offer."

* * *

><p>Captain Amanda Greene tried to keep her expression relaxed, but the skin around her eyes and nose tensed into a wince. It was a habit she had to fight every time her ship came out of the Slipstream, never completely knowing what the black void of slipspace would suddenly morph into. Even after all these years it was still a nervous tick.<p>

From the pedestal beside her, Melissa, the ship's AI, peered curiously at her. "If you are worried about the brightness of the local star, I can have the viewport polarized."

Greene smiled. "Yes, please," she breathed, masking her true discomfort.

Apocolypso was under three minutes out to the system where the slipspace anomaly had been reported. The ship was already running dark and silent, and the crew was in place, ready for action. Melissa was poised, seated cross-legged on her pedestal, and her gaze swept casually across the bridge.

To Greene, she was an interesting AI. Melissa was the most advanced AI she had ever encountered, yet she still returned to child-like poses and mannerisms. _Perhaps it's something she'll grow out of_, Greene pondered. Either way, she was efficient, fast, and helpful. In the past, she had dealt with AIs that had no initiative, only responsive programming. This next generation of UNSC AIs appeared to be very promising to Greene.

"Fifteen seconds," the navigation officer called out.

Amanda straightened in her chair and braced herself.

"Three, two, one"

Stars, both distant and near, blossomed into existence, with one brightly shining locally off to port. Three gas giants were within range of visual scanners and Melissa quickly brought up initial data

in rectangular brackets based upon the previous ship that had discovered the slipspace anomaly. Density, range, mass and chemical makeup all filled the tiny windows that Melissa provided. A trio of moons that orbited the farthest gas giant held little data to reveal, and the reports began to come in.

"Comparison data shows the same planet configuration," one officer said. "Slipspace exit was clean. We are holding steady," added another.

Melissa stood slowly. "Captain, I'm not detecting any transmissions across any spectrums. Solar radiation is partially clouding our sensors. To get an accurate reading of the rest of the system we'll need to begin a partial reconnaissance orbit. At the most sensible speed, it will take approximately 53 hours." She turned and faced Greene. "Shall I begin?"

Frowning, Greene looked out the viewport. "Melissa, calculate the location of the slipspace anomaly according to the current orientation of this system. I want to know exactly where it happened and where that location is now. If it was close to a moon or planet, there might be a possibility of finding some aftermath, whether that is debris or radiation spikes."

"Yes, ma'am."

Greene looked over her shoulder and found Ensign Rolf Sorenson seated at her console towards the rear of the bridge. Her bright blue eyes blinked back tiredness. Being a "Second Officer in training", Rolf was eager to fulfill her duties and that of the absent Lieutenant Nicholas Hyde, and her presence on the bridge spoke of her commitment. "Melissa," she prompted, turning back around. "Go ahead and commence with the recon orbit."

Greene activated her comm unit. "All hands, we'll remain at Alert Alpha until we know fully what's going on in this system. Secure decks 1 and 7."

After a few moments, Melissa came back with the Greene's first request. "Captain, after calculating the planetary bodies' most likely orbits of several weeks prior, the anomaly would have happened closest to F342w's third moon, F342w 3L." On the main viewport, Melissa added additional data and a single green point illuminated the empty space just outside of F342w 3L's lunar orbit. It expanded into a green sphere that encased the nearby moon.

Captain Greene squinted her eyes intently, hoping what she was about to order wouldn't lead them to their doom. "Make a direct course for that moon, full Stealth."

The AI nodded and set the ship on its new course.

"Captain?"

Greene spun around in her command chair to see Rolf looking worried. She walked over to the ensign's station and stood beside her. "What is it?" she asked, her eyes tracing over the navigation data on Rolf's screen.

"Captain," she began, her voice barely audible over the normal din of

the bridge. "No disrespect, but are not our orders limited to 'holding station?'"

Green leaned in closer. "We won't be detected, Sorenson. If it's the Covenant they won't be able to find us, and any Insurrectionist vessels are just as blind."

Rolf swallowed, perhaps wondering how far she should press the issue. "And what if the anomaly was caused by something else entirely? An interstellar event or a new species we haven't encountered yet?"

"For now, we're just going to recon the target area, nothing more until Nagamo arrives." As she offered a brave smile and stood, she could sense a tingling in the back of her mind. The concept of the anomaly being caused by something completely unknown hadn't crossed her thoughts in a realistic sense, but it was a possibility.

"I want a full sensors makeup on the entire system as we head in. Keep a tight beam on that moon and adjust course laterally every hour but remain on the same heading." Greene took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she headed back to her chair. Galin Thorm, you better get here fast._

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Even though she was only 16 years of age, Nicole was still considered a seasoned soldier. Her Spartan training had made her into a fighting machine—even if her prior mission parameters never tested that fact. Her hand-to-hand combat skill was better than most of the other Spartans and her smaller stature was something that did not hinder her abilities in the least. She was still slightly taller than the average male, and being as young as she was, she still turned some heads as she walked down the Nagamo's main corridor towards the galley. Donning on a simple crewman's uniform she had found in the barracks, Nicole ducked inside the small mess hall and blended right into the dozen others eating.

She noticed the floor wasn't tiled but rather softly coarse, like some training complexes she had been in. When she spied the partially opened shelves along the far wall full of workout equipment that she realized the galley doubled as a gym. Given the size of the ship, it was no surprise that various sections served more than one purpose, but it made her wonder what ONI had done with the room normally designated for physical recreation.

From a table to her right, a mumbling voice interrupted her lull. It was Professor Sorvad slowly typing away on a datapad. He was seated alone against the wall, blowing warming breaths into his hands every so often. Despite his introverted disposition, Sorvad was the only person she kind of knew aboard Nagamo, so she poured two cups of steaming coffee and walked over.

She set one cup in front of him and held on to the other while still standing before him. When he ignored the friendly gesture, Nicole cleared her throat to get his attention.

Without looking up he growled, "I don't drink that intoxicant."

"Neither do I."

He tried to hide it but she could see his eyes traced the swirling steam emitting from the cup. Sorvad continued to ignore her for a pair of breaths, but then he took the cup with both hands and slowly raised his head. His brow furrowed as he frowned. "Who are you?"

Nicole sat down on the opposite side of the rectangular table and gave a flat smile. "I came here with you from Reach."

His eyes narrowed and he seemed to hold his question in his thoughts before verbalizing it. "I didn't think Spartans would be so . . . young." He studied her with his intelligent eyes. "You can't be much older than my daughter."

She shrugged and leaned over her cup, the heat warming her body. Nicole tried to ignore his visual scan of her face, but he was searching for something, that was for sure.

He suddenly straightened his spine. "You are Filipino, correct?"

Nicole perked up, slightly surprised at his conclusion. She nodded.

"My wife's step-sister was from a city on Mars called New Legaspi. She had the same eyes as you."

"Huh," was all she could think of. That was the same place of her birth and she was wondering about any more details Sorvad would have on this step-sister in-law, but it appeared his moment of friendliness was over and he returned to his datapad. She raised her chin at him. "What's that?"

He sighed and held up the datapad. "Captain Thorm gave me the preliminary data on this 'slipspace anomaly' and I've been reviewing it ever since." He frowned. "Did you not receive such a thing?"

She shook her head.

"I see now why they asked me to come." He stirred a little in his chair, trying to find a different way of sitting without appearing to be too obvious. Sorvad held the datapad up. "Years ago I was running comparisons on various satellite surveys across established and possible colonies. When I started detecting patterns, I was asked to join up with the Office of Naval Intelligence." He leaned in, almost conspiratorially. "Evidence of Artificial Engineering that wasn't Human raised the security levels, and I was brought on and given a position very close to a friend of yours, Dr. Catherine Halsey."

Nicole forced a smile. "What does that have to do with this anomaly?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked, pulling his head back and frowning. "I'm a xenoarchaeologist. They must be hiding the fact that this is

an extraterrestrial find of a long-forgotten race."

She wanted to ask why ONI wouldn't tell him as much, but she figured he would site some secret code of interpretation that only scientists are allowed to know. But if he was right, then from the details she had been given, she was the only military asset given to a two-ship force sent to investigate. Nicole didn't know whether to feel honored or worried.

Sorvad frowned when his datapad beeped a negative tone. "Well, at the very least we know the anomaly is not man-made." He set his jaw and continued to work, shutting off the outside world once again.

Nicole sighed. The professor was interesting. He got excitable and even anxious when talking about his work, but there was something hidden behind his discomfort of being aboard Nagamo. His argument with the captain of Teveden about not wanting to leave Reach and his standoff with Thorm and Jokling crossed her mind. When he began drumming his fingers on the table she spied his wedding ring and something clicked in her brain. "Family. You don't like being away from your family," she said conclusively.

He ceased his drumming and slowly raised his head. Sorvad gave her a look that said "why wouldn't I be?" But he offered a thin-lipped smile. "Let's just say that I like to keep them close. Sãira, especially."

"Your daughter?"

His smile vanished. "Yes."

Nicole narrowed her eyes, forcing herself to concentrate on his words, the way he said them, and the previous statements he made. It was Intelligence Work that she took to well, after all. To Nicole, Sorvad's protectiveness of Sãira, sounded like it had come from a past event where she was in danger. Or perhaps an illness? She returned her roaming gaze back to the professor and found him eyeing her suspiciously. She stood abruptly. "Nice meeting you, Professor."

Sorvad nodded and his entire body slackened a bit. "Nice meeting you, Spartan."

She brought a hand and tapped her breastbone. "It's Nicole."

He shook his head. "It's Spartan. That is what you are." He returned to his datapad without further explanation.

Nicole stood there in stunned amazement. Anger started to brew in the back of her mind, but she forced a calming breath and turned to go. That is not all that I am. She ducked down the corridor, no longer hungry.

* * *

><p>"Captain, a moment of your time?"<p>

Amanda Greene flinched upright. She had dozed off in her command chair and her right arm had been propping up her tired head. She blinked away sleepiness and composed herself before turning around to

face Rolf Sorenson. "What is it?"

Even though the ensign looked even more tired than Greene felt, she still appeared focused on the task at hand. "Ma'am, I believe we can solidify the theory of this anomaly." She motioned to her screen.

Greene straightened up fully in her chair and pointed to the main viewscreen. "Bring it up here."

After a moment hesitation of shyness, Rolf transferred her screen and the moon data on F342w 3L was replaced by a plethora of equations, mathematics, and hand drawn diagrams.

The captain cracked a smile. _Now I know why she felt nervous at the attention_. "What have you concluded?"

"There's a good chance that the radiation levelsâ€"that we've already detected with our long-range sensors at the anomaly siteâ€"line up with the signatures we find in FTL drives." She switched the view to a chart of multiple makes and models of various UNSC and Covenant ships. "We can rule out smaller ships, such as _Prowler_-class vessels, but the larger ones . . . well, there are a few possibilities." As she spoke, certain ship-types dimmed and the ones remaining brightened and were brought forward. "From a Covenant Corvette to a UNSC Cargo Hauler; they are all capable of producing such a massive disruption that _Raven's Call_ detected."

Amanda nodded. Sorenson's file stated that she had an IQ level that rivaled most top researchers in their collective fields, but it was her tact for analysis that was one of the primary reasons Amanda had brought the promising ensign aboard. Aside from her social awkwardness and a few odd reprimands in the past, Sorenson had amazing potential in the Prowler Corps.

"I concur, Captain," Melissa spoke from her pedestal. "There are still a number of possibilities as to what exactly caused their drive to falter, but . . . "

Greene frowned. "What is it, Melissa?"

The AI cleared the main viewscreen and the previous image of the moon nearest the target location was back on the display. A red dot appeared on screen, hovering above the moon's thin atmosphere. "Captain, I have something."

Amanda nodded. "Go ahead."

Melissa tilted her head to the side ever-so-slightly. "I'm getting faint readings of an oscillating energy signature. There's some magnetic distortion from the moon itself, but I believe I can lock it down if we cease our lateral course adjustments."

"Do it."

It was a few minutes longer, but when Melissa turned to face her, the AI's expression was as serious as ever. "The sensors are picking up a fluctuation similar to a ship's cloaking system activating and deactivating at random. It's as if the mechanism itself is failing."

Greene felt her stomach grow cold. "What profile does the energy signature match?"

Melissa turned to face forward and the text on the viewscreen sent a shiver down the Captain's spine. The AI folded her arms across her chest. "Covenant."

The word hung in the air like smoke from a cabin fire. Greene swallowed hard. _This mission just got a lot more complicated_.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Galin Thorm awoke groggy. He forced his eyes to open and found his room was still dark. Since his alarm was connected to the environmental controller in his cabin, he knew by the lack of a warm orange glow that should be filling his room that he still had a while before his scheduled wakeup. He turned onto his side, expecting to find Kandis still asleep next to him, but she wasn't there.

He blew a frustrated sigh out his nostrils. Despite staying awake for her arrival late last night, Kandis had apparently chosen to sleep in her own cabin. And now, for that reason, his "late to bed, early to rise" routine was denying him an adequate block of sleep before a long day ahead of him. Galin rolled back over on his back and stared at the ceiling, forcing his mind to ease. _She's just in one of her moods. She'll snap out of it once the mission is in full swing._

Galin rubbed his eyes and sat up. The burning in his eyes subsided and he spun 90 degrees to place his bare feet on the floor. "Jovan," he croaked, his voice strained.

The AI flickered into existence on the pedestal next to Galin's terminal, basking the room in a soft green glow. "Yes, Captain?"

"What's our ETA?" he asked, standing in the process. Galin started for the personal lavatory and bit back a curse when he found a pair of Kandis' undergarments in the doorway. It was a careless way for a cleaning crew or an uninvited guest to suspect their Captain was breaking regulations. He scooped them up and tossed them in the bin that connected to an incinerator near the ship's engines.

"We are still 7 hours and 22 minutes out." Jovan rotated to follow the captain. "All systems are nominal. We are still in full Stealth," he added.

"Good." Galin made it to the sink and splashed some cold water onto his face. "That's all for now, Jovan." When the room plunged into darkness from the AI's absence, Galin switch on the lavatory light, wincing at its brightness. His morning routine beckoned him, though he loathed working out this early, but his mission briefing wasn't for another three hours. _Might as well_.

Moments later, Galin was dressed in his physical training outfit and heading towards the galley/fitness room. Even the late shift crewmen

would be finished with their cleaning of the area and the place should have been vacant. But when he was still a dozen paces away, he heard the shuffling of feet and short, calculating breaths coming from the small gap in the double doorway.

When he entered, he saw something he wasn't prepared for. With movements faster than anyone he had ever seen, a teenage girl was delivering blow after blow against a workout dummy, its thick base nearly pitching backward with every third hit. Sweat drenched her loose-fitting shirt, and her short black hair glistened in the overhead lighting. Her skin was dark, but not as dark as Galin's, with an earthy tone to it. There was no mistaking who she was.

She was halfway through another fighting move, this time with her hands positioned high above her head, when she finally noticed him. "Captain," she greeted without labored breath. She casually rested her arm upon the dummy's shoulder and smiled. "I'm surprised to see you here so early."

Galin's brow furrowed. "I could say the same to you." He then frowned. "I thought Spartans always trained with their armor on. Something about reflex enhancement?"

Nicole offered a half smile. "I already ran through my regiment with my MJOLNIR. I'm just finishing up the morning with a cool-down workout." She let her gaze drift downward. "Sometimes it's good to feel your own sweat and potential, you know?"

He didn't fully, not in the way she was thinking, but he nodded anyway. He glanced around the room and found nearly every piece of equipment had been dragged out of storage. "If you need me to go, I can come back later. I don't want ONI finding out I held up a Spartan honing her skills," he said lightly.

She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head slightly. "Why would ONI get upset about that?"

The report of Operation: TORPEDO flashed before his eyes. "They can easily replace a lowly ship captain, but you Spartans . . . well, let's just say I'm honored that ONI entrusted me with bringing you along."

Her gaze drifted down again, this time remaining fixed for a while. "I'm the only one assigned to this mission, aren't I? There's no Spartans or ODST squads waiting aboard Apocolypso?"

Galin held in his breath for a moment. If he were talking to any other officer or specialist he would have cut the conversation off long ago. But a Spartan deserves to know. "I think ONI is leaving us to fend for ourselves. I'd like to call it HIGHCOM's confidence in us as a unit, but I fear the UNSC is just too spread out to muster any sort of immediate response." He sighed. "But if there is something big waiting for us at our destination, trust me; we're not going to do anything rash. The Office of Naval Intelligence has always calculated the cost before handing down orders."

The Spartan snorted. "Not from what I've heard." She shook her head and waved a hand to dismiss further dialog on the subject. "I'm sorry, sir. Didn't mean to sound subordinate."

Galin swallowed, hearing the harshness in his words. "No, you're right. When you've been an officer for as long as I have been, you start to automatically response in platitudes."

"I understand, sir. And thank you for talking." She grinned passively and took a look around the room, as if noticing her path of destruction for the first time. "Do you want me to put all of this stuff away or leave it out for you?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "And thank you for talking."

Spartan-458 threw a quick salute and walked out, picking up her backpack in the process.

As Galin watched her leave, he realized that ONI had picked the right Spartan for the job. She was still young but possessed an understanding and maturity that some of his own peers lacked. It was refreshing. Despite their lack of knowledge of the mission, he was now even surer of his crew and their abilities.

Suppressing a yawn, Galin began to stretch.

* * *

><p>Covenant.

The entire bridge crew sat completely still as Melissa continued to narrow down the possible Covenant ships with cloaking systems. It was as if the AI was the only working individual in that moment.

Greene snapped herself out of her daze and started issuing orders. "Sensors, focus everything you've got on that ship. Melissa, bring us to full stop, quietly. And maintain full Stealth." She spun around and gave Sorenson a respectful nod. "Nice work, Rolf."

"Captain," Melissa said. "The ship appears to be holding steady several kilometers above the moon. They won't be able to enter the Slipstream until they clear lunar orbit."

Amanda set her jaw. As cautious as she naturally was, they couldn't let a supposedly damaged enemy ship escape without know why it was so deep in UNSC Space. "Melissa, bring us in, but keep us outside of any know Covenant weaponry range."

"Yes, Captain."

It was another half hour before Melissa came back with the final description of the Covenant ship. It looked like a modified Corvette that appeared to be retrofitted to house the cloaking systems, and other unidentified protrusions rose along the ships port and starboard sides. Melissa labeled it as a Corvette, for its sheer size and shape, but it was obvious that this vessel was designed for a special purpose.

To Captain Greene, it was unsettling to see such a mighty Covenant ship in a state of dormancy within visual range. Galin's going to flip when he sees this_.

After Apocolypso_ had been safely in position for nearly four hours,

Amanda decided to try and grab some much-needed sleep. The Covenant ship was still unmoving and its shield and cloaking systems were locked in a pattern of malfunction. Melissa concurred that the pattern was random and not some sort of false display to lead them into a trap. It was unnerving to the entire crew, but with Apocolypso on station, waiting for the Covenant ship to come to life, Melissa assured Captain Greene that there was no immediate threat. Sorenson agreed.

"Melissa, I'll only be gone for a few hours, but alert me the moment anything changes. Follow protocol AJ-719 if you are unable to reach me in time for decisive action." Amanda stood and walked out of the bridge.

* * *

><p>Captain Greene didn't bother changing out of her uniform and she awoke with a distinct lack of cleanliness. She quickly ran a brush through her dirty-blond hair and washed her face before ducking out of her quarters and starting for the bridge.<p>

The corridors were bathed in dimmed red light, and Amanda could hear a distant argument coming from the female barracks off to her left. She frowned and turned down the short hallway to find two women standing, facing each other and Rolf Sorenson leaning against the doorway to the barracks with a perpetual wince on her face. Rolf and a tall woman were wearing robes and their hair dripped wet, while the female officer stood in full uniform with her arms folded across her chest.

"It wasn't like that," Rolf tried to explain quietly.

The tall woman with auburn hair turned from her pose in front of the female officer she had been yelling at. "Then what would you call it? 'A friendly from-behind hug'? Cause it sure as hell felt like you were feeling me up!"

"Ladies," the officer interrupted, obviously on her last nerve. "May I remind you that we are on Alert Alpha and any insubordination will result in immediate isolation confinement?" She caught sight of Captain Greene and saluted out of reflex, the other two unmoving. "Captain, ma'am. I . . ."

Amanda held up a hand. "What's going on here?"

Rolf awkwardly pulled her robe tighter and looked downcast, unable to respond under the captain's scrutiny and gaze. "A misunderstanding," she finally said.

The tall woman snorted. "If you call 'assault' that, then yeah."

Greene raised her chin. "Are you hurt? Do you need any medical attention?"

"Well, no, but she assaulted me."

The captain glanced over at Rolf who now looked almost sick with helpless frustration. She turned back to the offended woman and narrowed her eyes. Over her shoulder, Amanda could see a crowd of men

gathering outside their section, some looking curious and others wide-eyed for a cat fight. "Do you think this apparent incident warranted disrupting both the female and male barracks?"

The auburn-haired woman paused with her opened mouth ready for a retort, but she looked back at the officer, read her beckoning expression for cause to lock both of them up, and she seemed to deflate. "No, Captain."

"Like Sergeant Brendall said, we are on Alert Alpha and any insubordination will result in immediate confinement." Amanda leaned in. "_Any_ insubordination." She let her gaze spread across the gathered crowd.

"Yes, Captain," both the tall woman and Rolf said in unison.

Amanda nodded slowly. "Dismissed, all of you." When the crowd turned but still lingered, she raised her voice. "Now!"

Everyone scattered except Rolf and Amanda. The captain stood there, waiting until all were out of earshot. "Ensign Sorenson, of all the times to cause a disruption, you chose now?"

Rolf's eyes glazed over with a tearful shine. "It wasn't what she said," she practically whispered. "Several women and I were gathered in the shower when one of them pushed me from behind and I fell forward onto Technician Thompson." Rolf looked down again.

Greene sighed and folded her arms across her chest. "And why would they stage such a thing?"

She shrugged and ran a hand through her wet hair. "They don't like me. Ever since I was brought aboard Apocolypso people have singled me out."

A few trace lines in Sorenson's psychiatric profile flashed before Amanda's mind's eye and she suddenly put the pieces together. The previous incidents in Sorenson's rap sheet were all based around conflict over her bisexual tendencies, and it was one reason she was so awkward around everyone. She always feared criticism or a lack of trust, and sometimes the teasing bubbled over into all out brawls.

Since Sorenson had joined the Office of Naval Intelligence at such a promising, early age, her hormonal and emotional outbursts were thrown into a tailspin when she had been brought into a group of abusive male training instructors. That first 6 months had changed her opinion of men and subsequently shaped her sexuality during her developing years. It was a very complicated situation and Greene knew she had to be sensitive. "It's because of your . . . orientation?" she asked carefully.

Rolf nodded. "They probably figured they could set me up to teach me a lesson or something." She pulled her robe tighter and shivered. "I'm sorry, Captain."

"Don't be," she said in a sympathetic tone. Greene unfolded her arms and pulled out her personal datapad. "Tell you what I'll do." She accessed the quartermaster program connected to the ship's main database. "Since Lieutenant Hyde is on leave, and because you are a

brevet Second Officer, you can take his quarters for the duration of this mission." She furrowed her brow. "Would that help?"

Sorenson frowned deeper than she had before. "I'm not a charity case."

"Then consider it an order." She returned her datapad to her belt clip and gave a thin-lipped smile. "You're too valuable to lose to some internal barrack squabbling. And I'll see to it that Tech Thompson and her cretins get reprimanded."

"Please don't," Rolf blurted out. "I'd rather just let the issue drop."

Greene eyed the ensign for a moment. It was obvious that the young woman was in some emotional turmoil and it would probably be for the best to quell the problem now and end it. "Very well." She straightened up. "After you get settled in, meet me on the bridge. I'm sure Nagamo isn't too far away."

"Yes, ma'am."

As Amanda Greene turned and headed for the bridge, her mind raced. She knew bringing Sorenson aboard was a good decision, despite her past, but if not for the ensign's quick thinking and critical insight, Greene would probably have no just reason to sustain her career. It was a kind of gamble.

She just hoped it was worth the risk.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Nagamo emerged from the Slipstream as quietly as it had entered. A call was immediately transmitted from Apocolypso and Captain Greene began informing Captain Thorm of the entire situation.

Nicole-458 stood near the rear of the bridge, watching in quiet reverence of how Thorm handled the data. He seamlessly divvied out tasks to Jovan and the crew while offering input of his own to Greene and her ship's AI, Melissa. Even Professor Sorvad was among the busy, already running calculations to bolster Lieutenant Jokling's own analysis.

The Spartan walked over to Sorvad's station and saw the older man hard at work. He was muttering in his native tongue again but he seemed to be less irritable than before.

Over the comm, Greene continued her dialogue. "We detected a power fluctuation resembling a cloaking system that was malfunctioning."

"Szar!" Sorvad bit out a little too loudly, as he pounded his fists on the workstation's desk.

Nicole didn't know the foreign-tongue word, but the way he said it and reacted meant something had just ticked him off royally. She didn't find it amusing, nor did the captain.

"Care to enlighten us, Professor?" Thorm asked, turning away from the main viewscreen.

"It's the Covenant. It's the damn Covenant." Sorvad's face turned red, and not from the embarrassment of attention. Nicole wondered if it was because he had been set on something other than anything known. She knew he had high expectations of some alien encounter, but this latest conclusion was bound to set him on a tirade. One of his motivating factors had just been burned up before it even entered atmosphere.

"As I was saying," Greene continued, looking a little annoyed. "Yes, he's correct. The ship we found is of Covenant origin and appears to be a modified Corvette. Transmitting the details now." On the main viewscreen, Greene was replaced by several images of a blurred outline that resembled a Corvette. "We haven't really been able to gather much more than that. I wanted to wait for you before we commence further reconnaissance."

Captain Thorm repositioned his feet. "Good work, Amanda. We'll be coming in on a heading relative to your starboard, 350 degrees. Hold tight." As the communications officer cut the link, Thorm started for Sorvad's station. "You knew it was the Covenant?" he asked, with no trace of anger over the professor's previous outburst.

Sorvad's head rose slowly. "Not until I saw those energy signatures of the fluctuations _Apocolypso_ reported." His voice took on a bitter edge. "There was nothing special about those readings, nothing elegant." The professor slumped in his chair, defeated. "Any dumb AI could tell you it's the Covenant."

From his pedestal, Jovan harrumphed. "I'll just choose to ignore that comment." He turned to face the captain. "Sir, if we could close enough, we might be able to detect if there are any lifeforms aboard."

Galin frowned. "Why wouldn't there be?"

From the other end of the bridge, Lieutenant Jokling stood, her face one of sudden realization. "Because a slipspace drive failing to enter the Slipstream could have caused a massive radiation spike, killing everyone on board instantly." Her gaze seemed to refocus and she shrugged. "At least that's _one_ possibility."

"Yes," Jovan said. "One of many."

Thorm nodded a few times, considering his choices. "Professor, would you conclude as much?"

There was a moment's hesitation from Sorvad. "Yes, but does it matter? You will do what ONI does best: get its fingers into everything." He made a few poking motions with his hands.

Captain Thorm smiled. "Alright, then. Let's bring her in for a closer look-see."

As the stars outside the bridge viewports shifted, Nicole felt her heart beat a little faster_. If Jokling's analysis is correct_. . . . She wondered if anyone else knew that she alone would be able to

investigate the derelict ship. Her armor provided her ample protection against radiation and she doubted Nagamo or Apocolypso had any gear others could use for such a specialized recon. She grinned.

* * *

><p>Amanda Greene stood helpless on Apocolypso's bridge as she watched Nagamo close in on the Covenant ship. Galin had offered to get the necessary readings for life-signs, but with the cloaking systems of the Corvette malfunctioning as they were, it would be impossible to know for sure.

Galin's voice came over the comm. "Jovan says he can't detect any lifeforms and that he can't be certain the interiors of the ship were cleansed with the rest. There are readings to suggest a radiation leak has occurred." He paused briefly. "Want to bring in Apocolypso and see if we can do some binaural sensor readings?"

Greene sighed. "I doubt it will do any good but we'll see." She nodded to Melissa.

The ship lurched forward, smoothly and quietly. For almost three minutes the bridge was completely silent until Melissa spoke from her pedestal, her yellow hair flowing loosely over her shoulders. "Captain, if I may comment . . ."

Amanda's brow furrowed. "Go ahead."

"If we are unable to confirm or detect a Covenant presence aboard the ship, we will need to send a team over."

"Yes, I figured that."

Melissa looked curiously at her, as if she was expecting an answer that had not yet come. She folded her arms across her chest and sighed. "I've already checked our inventory and unless Nagamo picked up a couple HazMat vac-suits that are combat rated, we really only have one option."

Amanda swore to herself. Galin had told her about the Professor and the Spartan, but up until now, she had totally forgotten that the super soldier was on Nagamo. "The Spartan." She caught a smirk on the AI's face. "Once our readings are done, I'll talk it over with Captain Thorm."

* * *

><p>"Well, nothing." Galin chewed on the inside of his cheek as he read the data on screen.<p>

Jovan winced from his pedestal. "Technically not 'nothing,' sir, but more or less 'inconclusive.' The inability for both of our ships' sensors to completely scan the derelict Corvette's interior was a possibility. If we could shut down its cloaking systems for good, then yes, we could finally get an accurate reading."

Galin scratched at his beard and keyed his comm. "Greene, did you get that last set of numbers?"

"Yeah. Same as ours, huh?"

Jokling, slowly making her way towards Galin through the maze of consoles, frowned. "Shouldn't we just blow it up? Take the risk out of the equation and just report back to HIGHCOM?"

Galin snorted. "You think they wouldn't court-martial all of us for that?" He glanced over at a patient-looking Jovan and keyed his comm again. "My AI says that if we could kill their cloaking systems loop we could see what's on the Corvette for certain."

"But to do that we'd have to send someone over," Greene stated matter-of-factly.

Galin tried to hide his smile. Greene had guessed it right. He looked up and scanned the room. When his eyes found the Spartan standing calmly behind the professor, he nodded. "Are you up for a little excitement?"

Spartan-458 snapped to attention. "Sir."

Over the comm, Greene cleared her throat. "Galin, Melissa has an idea. I'll transmit the details, but I think we'll need to dock and have the Spartan come aboard _Apocolypso_."

"Why?"

Melissa's voice came over the comm. "With the possible radiation leak aboard the Corvette, there's no telling what our communications would be like, what with transmitting over normal channels in all of this static."

When he read the short but detailed file, he motioned to Jovan and the two ships began the standard docking maneuver they had performed a few days prior. Galin rose from his command chair and was about to escort the Spartan, but Professor Sorvad got up from his station and blocked the captain's path.

"If I may accompany you, Captain, I believe I can help." Sorvad's voice was low and resonant, but to Galin's relief, lacking in anger. The professor had apparently calmed down after realizing his role in all of this had been greatly diminished. "I am familiar with communication programming and could help oversee the process."

Galin caught the Spartan glance over to Sorvad. "Very well, Professor. Come with us."

* * *

><p>After a quick stop by the Arms Room where Nicole retrieved an MA5B Assault Rifle and a M6 Pistol, the three Nagamo residents met a youngish woman who identified herself as Ensign Sorenson. Nicole noticed the shock of blonde hair tucked underneath her cap and her freckled skin would likely classify her as 'cute.' Her demeanor was quiet and almost nervous. _Has she never seen a Spartan before?_

Sorenson blinked her large eyes. "Captain Greene didn't expect two crewmen would be coming aboard," she said with a wavering voice.

Beside Nicole, Sorvad offered a mild chuckle. "Crewmen? Ha!" "I am _Professor_ Laszlo Sorvad, and this is _Spartan_-458."

Thorm made a face. "Professor Sorvad will be available for the AI communications to 458's armor systems. Captain Greene should already be notified."

"Yes, well, right this way." Sorenson slowly spun on her heel.

Nicole looked at both men, all three of them giving one another a reassuring nod.

"Good Luck, Spartan," Thorm said with a smile and a salute. He paused, probably realizing this was the official sendoff, but just smiled bigger and headed back down the docking collar.

Nicole and Sorvad followed in Sorenson's wake, weaving their way down corridors to end up at the bridge. The normal banter from the crewmen instantly cut off for a moment as they caught sight of the two new arrivals.

Captain Greene was standing next to the sensors station and greeted them with a nod. "Professor Sorvad, Spartan-458." Her expression tightened and then relaxed. "I'm not certain how best this will work, but I'm sure Melissa can walk you through the procedure, Professor."

Past Greene on a pedestal, a yellow avatar of a slender female AI appeared. "I've already done the programming, but you'll probably want to examine my work for yourself."

"You can use my station," Sorenson offered. As she guided Sorvad to a terminal towards the back of the bridge, Nicole could see the younger woman's gaze constantly switch back and forth between Sorvad and Nicole, as if she couldn't take her eyes off the armor.

Nicole mentally shrugged.

She caught sight of the communications station and wondered how the crewman felt with his job being temporarily usurped by Sorvad. The professor seemed to be competent, and Thorm must have seen something in his file that made him ahead of the two comm experts.

Sorvad began working, and Nicole was nearly startled when the AI abruptly appeared from another pedestal situated directly behind Nicole. "Perhaps we should get to know one another?"

"What?" Nicole asked, turning to face Melissa, only to find the AI facing the other way. It was then that she noticed the AI's transmission had come through the Spartan's internal comm unit. A few heads looked up from their stations but they quickly went back to work. "What do you mean?" she asked quietly, this time through the comm.

Melissa gave a breathy laugh. "The Professor's soon going to realize that to maintain the connection between you and this ship he's going to have to adapt your communications gear in greater depth than previous thought."

Right on cue, Sorvad bit back a curse from Sorenson's station and said, "We can't just establish a link. We'll need to devise a comm unit that can carry tight-beam transmissions." He waved one of the comm officers over and started to consult.

As they continued to work, bringing in various comm equipment and testing it, Nicole frowned. "How did youâ€œ"

"I am one of the most advanced AIs ONI has ever created," Melissa interrupted. "And I need you to trust me. Completely."

"What are you talking about?" Nicole asked hesitantly.

"You and me and this mission." Her voice was even quieter than before. "It's not like you have a crystal data chip slot that I can network from, so when we're aboard the Corvette and I tell you something immediate, you'll have to react instantaneously. No hesitation."

Nicole continued to frown. The AI's language was so . . . fatalistic. _She must be holding something back_. "What are you not telling me?" Nicole asked.

"You are young, Spartan," Mellissa began, her words sounding distant, prophetic. "We will be all alone aboard an enemy ship in which you have little knowledge of. You need me, but I will not be able to interface with the Covenant vessel without your help." She paused. "I need you to trust that I will know the proper action to carry out if unforeseen circumstances should arise."

Before Nicole could unravel the AI's words, Sorvad's terminal beeped. "Captain Greene, I have a question, if I may. More of a suggestion, really."

One of Greene's eyebrows rose. "Yes?"

He held up a device no larger than three datacards stacked together. "We can supplement the Spartan's comm unit with a variation that Ensign Gurter has offered. We'll be able to carry a tight-beam transmission through the radiation haze, if such thing exists over on the Corvette." The professor pointed to his screen. "But what happens when the Spartan gets to the derelict ship? Considering the Corvette still has nominal power, there are numerous systems the Spartan will either have to bypass or work around, both security and passive."

Nicole watched Greene make a face and the captain folded her arms across her chest. "And your suggestion?"

Sorvad took a prefatory breath. "We send one of the AI's over and have them interface with the ship."

The din on the bridge was abruptly cut off, and Greene narrowed her eyes. "Any _other_ suggestions?"

"He's right," Sorenson spoke, placing her hand on the back of Sorvad's chair. "Even with our best decryption gear, there's no telling what we could encounter on the Corvette. I doubt one of our AI's have ever done this, though."

Captain Greene smirked. "You'd be surprised." She keyed the comm on Sorvad's terminal. "Galin, you hear all that?"

"Yeah." Captain Thorm's voice sounded tiny coming through the comm, and his subsequent sigh was a static burst. "This would have to be outside of the Protocol, Amanda. If a UNSC AI falls into the hands of the Covenant, it could mean the end of the war before we even return to Reach."

"But the same can be said for the Covenant," Sorvad persisted. He tapped a finger on his lips. "We could install a failsafe, some automatic purge of the programming, if that will put your minds more at ease."

"Or just blow it up," came Jokling's voice over the same comm channel as Thorm's.

Melissa nodded. "That seems to be the Marines' motto nowadays."

Nicole watched Captain Greene turn to the AI and hold a stern expression. "Melissa, can you do this? Are you certain you can interact with the Covenant vessel and remain free from programmatic compromise?"

The AI shrugged nonchalantly. "Only one way to find out." A tiny tray opened on the side of the pedestal, containing a glowing green crystal data chip. "I have copied most of my higher functions onto this chip. It contains the programming necessary for me to interact with Covenant technology and sync controls systems to _Apocolypso_." She bowed her head slightly. "In theory."

Greene shook her head. "Professor, your opinion?"

Sorvad hit a series of buttons on the terminal's keypad and rose. "If I didn't think it was possible I would not have suggested it." He took the small datacard containing his version of the comm unit program from the terminal's slot and walked over to the central AI pedestal and inserted it. "Though, it will be your decision, Captain, to go against the Protocol, to knowingly put the UNSC at risk." His words rumbled ominously from his chest and the bridge fell quiet once more. "But my professional opinion is that this can work."

On the pedestal, Melissa stirred. "This isn't about protocol, this is about winning a war. If we were able to successfully capture an enemy ship, with all of its data intact, just think of what we could learn." Melissa breathed an approximation of a sigh and her avatar straightened to its full height. "With the failsafe in place, there will be no risk," she added confidently.

Nicole stood between Greene and Melissa and silently watched the captain hang her head in slow resignation. "Galin, I think we have to do this. Without this plan we'll never know why this Corvette is here, what its plans were, and if there are other Covenant ships on their way."

Captain Thorm was slow to answer, but he agreed. "Very well. But this is a joint operation, Amanda. We will both be held responsible for our actions, not just you"

Nicole could almost feel the air in the bridge stiffen and freeze at Thorm's proclamation.

He continued. "While you finalize everything on your end, I'll begin to move Nagamo into a position above the Corvette, and with some luck, find a place where you can dock. Good luck, Captain Greene."

As Greene and the others began to set the plan in full motion, Nicole's gut went cold. This was a tremendous risk for both captains—and the UNSC as a whole. She looked up at the flickering image of the Covenant ship and wondered what would be the consequences if things went awry. She would be entrusted with safeguarding one of the highest forms of technology humanity has ever produced and barging onto an enemy ship. Two prowler-class vessels and their crews were depending upon her success.

Nicole glanced down at her opened hands and found them trembling slightly. She quickly closed them, clenching her fists tightly and squeezing out the last remnants of anxiousness. Deep down, past the chilling in her bones, Nicole eagerly awaited her chance to finally prove how much of Spartan she really was.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

As the airlock sealed behind her, Nicole could almost feel the deadly cold of space permeate into the docking collar that connected Apocolypso to the Covenant vessel's exterior hatch. She shivered but quickly double checked her weaponry to mask the movement, fearing the security camera would notice her uneasiness. She placed her MA5B on the magnetic strip on her back and secured her M6 pistol to the magnetic holster on her hip.

When she looked back up at her entry point, Melissa's voice broke the brief silence. "The techs were able to melt away the outer rim of the hatch without breaking the seal. You'll have to open the hatch manually, but I expect you won't have any trouble."

"Thanks for the confidence," she muttered. The exterior of the Corvette was still suffering from the malfunctioning camouflage and the hatch was no different, flickering in and out of existence at random intervals. It was unsettling.

Nagamo had been partially successful in finding a spot for the single-person infiltration team. The normal hangar bays and even the upper observation level that Covenant Corvettes normally sported were either sealed or were nonexistent. Captain Thorm had also explained that if the cloaking systems could be disabled they might find a more suitable place to dock. But first, Nicole had to shut them down.

She turned back around and nodded to the security cam, sending a sign of reassurance to Captain Greene and everyone else watching. Firmly placing her hands on the lip of the circular frame, on the opposite side of the hinges, Nicole pulled for all she was worth. The hatch resisted for a moment then slowly began to swing open with a hiss. A cloud of compressed air did the rest of the work and Nicole nearly

fell backward, if not for holding on to the hatch. Once the airlock depressurized, the air was still again.

The interior of the ship was dark, as expected, but a few glowpanels still flickering on and off, lining the upper portion on the curved walls of the Corvette's airlock. Deep purples and blues were not present, as per the usual Covenant dÃ©cor, but rather the room was colored a metallic black. A panel on the left wall had a juttred hologram that wavered in sync with the lighting.

Melissa took note of this quickly. "The entire ship is fluctuating in the same random pattern. This must be a reactor issue."

"Stay focused," Greene's voice interjected over the comm. "Your objective is to secure the bridge and disable the cloaking systems. If the ship is clean, we'll send a team over for further investigation, but until then you're on your own."

Nicole suppressed a snort. _What else is new?_ She took a deep breath and stepped inside the airlock. The soles of her armor found purchase on the deck, but Nicole felt an odd pulling on the rest of her, like a marionette being controlled by some giant, unseen hand. It was like riding the waves on some ancient sea vessel. _Gravity generators must be acting up as well_.

The blast door ahead was the three-petal panel that was the Covenant norm, but when she hit the simple release switch, the petals retracted and closed in the same unpredictable pattern as everything else. "Melissa, a little help?"

"By doing what?" Melissa argued. "Until you get me to the bridge or an operating terminal, I can't do much."

Nicole gritted her teeth. "Fine." She hit the switch again and watched the door open up in its state of malfunction. Keeping her fist poised over the release switch, she waited until the door was wide enough to permit. _There!_ She slammed her fist through the oval-shaped panel and a hail of sparks from both the switch and door briefly bathed the room in a golden hue. A jolt of current flickered over her armor, but dissipated without incident. Nicole pulled her hand out of the mess of electrical components and was satisfied to see that two of the three petals locked in place just wide enough for her to duck through.

"You Spartans are all the same," Melissa murmured. "Shall we proceed? Or will we be admiring your handiwork a while longer?"

Nicole frowned. "I just hope I don't have to do that to every door we come across." She reached behind her and grabbed her MA5B. Taking another preparatory breath, she ducked inside.

The Corvette wasn't anything like Nicole had pictured it would be. Instead of a quiet, ghostly gloom, the whole ship appeared to be heaving a constant stuttered breath. Lights and equipment flashed on and off and sometimes seemed like they would finally stay on permanently before failing once more. Her footing was still unsteady as gravity kept tugging and letting go. All in all, it took her the better half of an hour before arriving at a centralized corridor.

So far, there was no sign at all of Covenant forces.

"You think they all died in the radiation leak?" Nicole asked.

"_Apparent_ radiation leak," Melissa corrected. "That wouldn't explain why we haven't seen any bodies."

Nicole's eyebrows rose soberly. She hadn't thought of that. "Still, the Covies would at least be preparing for a boarding party to arrive, right?"

The AI paused. "Have you checked your atmospheric sensors?"

The Spartan's eyes glanced down at the readout on the lower left edge of her visor. _Huh_. "It's as thin as Mars' in here. You think they all suffocated?"

"That or they're hiding someplace where they can hold out long enough for repairs to be made."

"Or wait for rescue," Nicole offered, suppressing a chill. If the Corvette had managed to get off a distress signal before the entire ship went haywire, then there was a good chance that they could have unwelcoming company arrive in system at any time. She wanted to pick up her pace but kept slowly moving down the corridor with all of her senses alert. The gravity effect was less of an issue, now that she was moving along the upper spine of the ship, and it would make it easier for her to navigate and fight, should the need arise.

When she was halfway down the first stretch of hallway, Nicole heard something up ahead. She quickly hurried over to a soffit of one of the structural arches and knelt down, focusing her hearing. The sound of dripping liquid was coming from an opened doorway on the right, nearly ten meters away. _Had someone left a tap on?_ Raising her rifle, she crept towards the room.

Inside she found what appeared to be a maintenance room with pipes of various colors running up and down, left and right, and crossing one another. When she found the source of the sound, she lowered her rifle and looked down at the pool collecting in the corner of the room. A silver puddle was slowly expanding and would probably reach the main corridor in a few days' time. "It's hydraulic fluid."

"That console over there," Melissa beckoned.

Nicole looked up and saw a small holoscreen winking in and out on the wall-mounted device. "You want to risk plugging in to that thing?"

The AI didn't answer right away. "No, probably not. But . . . just stay still for a moment."

"What?"

Melissa sighed. "There's an error code flashing onscreen and if you keep your visual sensors focused on it for a second I can tell you what it means."

Nicole frowned and held her tongue._ If ONI R&D ever finds a way to implement AI's into Spartan armor, I'll pass._ After twelve seconds a

readout of the text flashed at the bottom of her heads-up display and read: MULTIPLE SYSTEMS FAILURE. LIFE SUPPORT, COMMUNICATIONS, WEAPONS: OFFLINE. REACTOR: STABLE.

"There. I'll relay that to Greene," Melissa offered. "You can move now; the message just repeats."

"Thanks," Nicole said sarcastically. She stepped back into the main corridor and didn't feel any better about the situation, despite the fact that the Corvette didn't have any of the necessary systems running at the moment. _It will just make any survivors more desperate_.

The Spartan stopped dead in her tracks. _And wouldn't I want to get off this ship and onto one capable of getting me back home if I was in the same situation?_ A sudden sense of dread washed over her and she turned her head back the way she had come. _Were there Covies just biting at the chance to hop ship?_

"What's wrong?" Melissa asked, detecting her momentary pause.

She swallowed hard. "Nothing, I hope." Nicole keyed her comm. "Captain Greene, I'd recommend keeping a security detail watching my exit. There's a possibility of survivors aboard and if they suddenly get frantic . . . "

"Copy that," Greene said. "We're dispatching a team now. Better make that trip to the bridge quick, Spartan."

"Yes, ma'am." She set her jaw and continued her trek down the corridor.

Melissa didn't sound convinced of the possible situation. "Do you really think the Covenant would try such a thing? If any of them are still alive, that is," she added half-heartedly.

Nicole snorted. "Um, what does it look like _we're_ doing? We're sneaking aboard an enemy ship with just different motives." She swallowed. "Don't underestimate someone that's desperate enough to risk everything."

"Oh, right." Melissa let silence reign for a breath before asking, "is that conclusion based upon personal experience?"

Nicole felt a pang deep in her stomach, but she brushed the emotional wound away. Now was definitely not the time to dredge up old training memories.

She came upon a leftward bend in the corridor and slowed her pace. The ceiling rose twice as high, and as she peeked around the corner she could see multiple weapons platforms along the outer wall and various ramps leading up to a higher level. She consulted her motion tracker and found no movement. Keeping a tight grip on her MA5B, she slowly crept out.

"This is where the port defense weaponry is stationed," Melissa commented. "We're getting close."

As Nicole moved forward to where the corridor straightened out and ended in a closed petal-door, she swept her gaze up and around.

Nothing popped out or even registered on her motion tracker. It wasn't until she was within arm's reach of the outer wall that she spied the thin slit that was the separation of the huge blast blinds sheathing the observation windows for the weaponry platforms. _I bet they seal the outer hull when they activate their cloaking systems. That's probably why we couldn't access the docking bays._

After one last bend in the corridor, Nicole found the bridge access foyer. If there was any resistance to be bunkered down, it would be on the other side of that thoroughway. But again, there was no Covenant to be found. The dark walls revealed no plasma damage nor were shield emplacements established on the patterned floor. _Are they preparing an ambush on the bridge itself?_

Taking one final deep breath, she reached for the bridge door release.

"Contacts!" a voice over the comm shouted. "Cloaked Tangos coming from the airlock!"

"Elites," Nicole breathed. _No time to waste_. She slammed her fist on the door release, but the light above the three-paneled entrance illuminated red. Behind her, a blast door slammed shut, closing off her only exit and cutting her off from the crewmen that so desperately needed her immediate help. "No!"

Helpless, she stood there, realizing that the enemy had prepared for her arrival and had easily trapped her without so much as closing a blast door. From the corners of both doorways, white mist erupted in a hiss.

The access foyer was venting atmosphere.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

The shudder from the explosion not only sent a vibration through the floor but sent a chill up the captain's spine. Through the eye of the security camera, Amanda Greene couldn't make out much, but the audio piping through the bridge speakers was enough to understand what was unfolding. Several cloaked Elites had exited the airlock and had successfully planted a shaped plasma charge that took out _Apocolypso's_ docking collar door, exploding it inward and taking out the security detail in the process.

"Break off from the Corvette. Sever the collar!" Greene ordered. The UNSC Prowler groaned and strained under the maneuver, but her keel came up and she pulled away from the Corvette. "Close off the airlock. I don't want them going any deeper into the ship."

"It's too late, Captain," Melissa announced from her pedestal. "The Covenant forces have breached the inner airlock."

Greene's eyes locked on to the main viewscreen that now displayed a graphical representation of _Apocolypso_. The three-dimensional view shifted and zoomed in on the starboard side where the inner airlock was flashing a brilliant red. "Dispatch all remaining security personnel to the inner airlock. And Melissa," she added, turning to

face the AI. "Tell the rest of the crew to head to the Armory. We're not letting them steal this ship."

"Amanda, what's going on?" Galin asked over the comm.

"Some of the Corvette's survivors managed to board our ship and have penetrated the inner airlock." She paused and glanced over to Melissa. "If they take the bridge, you'll have toâ€"

"It's not going to happen," Galin said, cutting her off before she could explain the Protocol again. "I'll have my security team over there shortly. ETA: 8 minutes."

* * *

><p>Nicole looked around, frantically trying to find some way to open the blast doors that had locked her inside. She knew she could survive for a very long time in hard vacuum, but she wasn't doing Apocolypso any good by being trapped. "Melissa, any suggestions?"

"I've got my hands full on board _Apocolypso_ right now," came back the AI's calm reply. "But wait, stop. Look back at the bridge blast doors."

Nicole complied and held still for a moment. The dual glowpanels above the door were slowly fading from red to orange to yellow. A sign of pressurization.

"There must be atmosphere on the bridge," Melissa said curiously. "Someone must still be alive in there. You might have company awaiting you."

With no time to comment on the AI's apparent lightheartedness, Nicole took her place next to the door with her rifle ready. When the yellow faded into green, the door pinged and slowly retracted its three petals. Nicole didn't poke her head out immediately, expecting suppressing fireâ€"if anyâ€"would come from multiple angles, and instead she allowed for several seconds to go by before craning her neck.

The Corvette's bridge was bathed in partial darkness, the only lighting coming from the glow of the holographic interfaces of the unoccupied consoles and terminals across the deck. The domed ceiling seemed to blend into the curved walls, while every viewport had been sealed with shutters similar to the weapons platforms she had previously seen. No external star field was visible and the bridge felt like a vacant, underground lair of some reptilian predator.

With no sign of movement from her motion tracker, Nicole crept out onto the outer level of the bridge. She quickly made her way to the left, finding an alcove to take momentary cover. Nearby, consoles lay dormant, like the ship had been abandoned and left on standby for a century. Nicole looked out and took note of a few terminals more brightly lit than others in the lower pits that flanked the raised middle section where a giant holo-image of a star map lay.

As desperately as she wanted to head towards the center and plug Melissa's data into a console, she knew she had to be sure the entire

bridge was clear. Moving a little more swiftly, she circled the outer perimeter without incident. When she approached the starboard side crew pit, a chime over the bridge speaker system caused her to duck behind a glowing console. Steadying herself, she checked the bridge's entrance and found the door had closed behind her, its light going red again. But the hissing of air could be heard even through the blast door. The red light began to fade to orange.

Nicole was about to have company.

* * *

><p>Rolf Sorenson sprinted down the corridor, nearly colliding with another female crewmember when she rounded the corner. The flow of crewmembers coming from the doorway at the end of the hall was dying down, but the panic of the moment was causing some to muscle their way in or out of the bottlenecked doorway. The Armory had almost been completely empty, save for a few M6 pistols, and the last of the crew had finally arrived. Rolf snagged an M6 and went for the last extra magazine on the rack, but another hand clamped down and wrestled it from Rolf's grip.<p>

"Thought you'd be up on the bridge hiding behind Captain Greene." The venom in the woman's voice was enough to tell Rolf who it was before even looking. Technician Thompson stood tall and confident, narrowing her brown eyes at Rolf. "Or maybe you just wanted to get one last cheap feel."

Anger replaced her anxiousness and Rolf's eyes narrowed. "Just drop it, Tech," she said disdainfully. "And know how to address an officer while you're at it." Rolf holstered the pistol and flashed her rank that was stitched on the jacket she had swiped from Lieutenant Hyde's cabin. She watched confusion ripple across Thompson's face.

"But how are you . . . I thought you were . . . "

Another muffled explosion rumbled the floor and Rolf followed the rest of the crew out of the Armory. Her hand dove into her pocket for her personal comm unit and swore when she realized it was still in her previous trousers in Hyde's cabin. She slid to a stop at an information kiosk and hastily typed in the security command codes. Melissa's icon appeared on the tiny viewscreen. "What was that last explosion?"

The AI's voice came back cool and mechanical. "Decks 1 through 3 have been compromised. Hostiles have penetrated the inner airlock and their whereabouts are currently unknown."

Rolf swore under her breath. While there were protocols in place during such events, the swift boarding action taken by the Covenant was enough to spread disorganization in the crew's response.

Captain Greene's voice suddenly came over the ship's speaker system. "This is Captain Greene. All hands, secure the decks. Enact failsafe Bravo-Alpha-Seven."

"Quickly!" a medtech shouted from down the hall, waving others to the safety of one of the reinforced barracks. The crew had just been ordered to find the nearest stronghold room, labeled near the doorways of the designated cabins, but a ping from the kiosk kept

Rolf from following the mass.

"Sorenson," Greene called, her image flashing on the viewscreen. She apparently had been notified by Melissa that Rolf was using this particular terminal.

"Yes, Captain."

"I need you on the bridge ASAP." She leaned in, her eyes pleading. "But be careful and bring an escort."

Rolf nodded. "I'm on my way." She switched off the kiosk and looked up at the last few crew members running away. "Thompson!"

The technician spun on her right heel, nearly to the barracks' safety, with her auburn hair whipping around gracefully. "What?" she demanded.

Rolf, already making her way down the hall, waved Thompson on. "The Captain needs us on the bridge," she explained, including the tech so as to not appear like she was pulling rank again. "C'mon."

Thompson grunted a curse, but followed nonetheless.

* * *

><p>Nicole kept her gaze locked on the bridge doorway. The door's light was now yellowish green and any second nowâ€" <p>

Behind her, one of the consoles lit up and started pulsing on and off. Then others on the port side pit began to enter the same flickering pattern. Even the central hologram of the star map was awash in numeric coding and Covenant symbols she couldn't recognize fast enough to know their meaning.

Finally, the door opened.

Nicole squinted out of habit, trying to make out any movement she could detect. A hazy figure appeared, abruptly falling to its knees and making a heaving, coughing sound. It was a partially-cloaked Elite. Only it didn't carry the commanding presence she had seen before in operational documents. It looked like it was dying.

There was no time to waste. Nicole bolted for the back wall, keeping low and quiet, and made it with the Elite still immobile on the ground. The beeping and flickering consoles were enough to mask her movement. When the armor cloaking system finally collapsed it revealed a dark-skinned Sangheili, clad in gray armor.

Nicole was fast. Faster than most Spartans in her class. She quickly made her move and within the span of a breath, she was upon the unsuspecting Elite. As if suddenly being made aware of her presence, the Elite rose to one knee and turned halfway around. Nicole brought the butt end of her rifle across the alien's face, spinning it back in the same prostrate position it had just come out of. With no hesitation, she slammed her right forearm on the back of its neck. The Sangheili slumped forward without as much as a grunt.

A brief flash of guilt echoed in her mind, as she realized how easy it was to put the Elite down. She had killed Covenant before, but for

some odd reason, she felt a small pang of guilt for taking its life. _It was a little too easy. _She frowned and knelt down by the warrior's head. The Elite's lips were gray, mismatching its dark purple skin tone, and she wasn't sure if that was normal. It almost looked like it was suffocating. Her expression deepened. _Or was it sick?_

Distractingly, the star map at the center of the bridge suddenly bloomed to full brightness and the image was quickly replaced by a stream of vertically flowing characters, some completely alien—and some were clearly numbers. Human numbers.

Nicole checked the entrance once more before hurrying down to the central console, abandoning her victim. Upon closer inspection, she saw the alien symbols moving in tandem with the Human ones. As she watched, the alien characters would glow brighter before switching to a 1 or a 0.

Someone or something was translating data before her eyes.

Completely confused, she pulled the data chip from her right thigh compartment and checked to see if Melissa was still there. She was.

"Melissa, you there?" she called over the comm.

"Yes, but things aboard _Apocolypso_ are getting complicated." She paused. "Oh, wait. You are on the bridge. Find a terminal to slide the data chip into."

Sorvad's voice came over the comm. "It should just plug in and automatically start the transfer."

"Quickly, Spartan." Captain Greene said. "We need you back here ASAP."

Apparently everyone was watching her now. Nicole walked closer to the bank of consoles arrayed around the central holo-projector. "But do you see what's happening here, Melissa? Look at the data I'm seeing." She steadied her gaze and stopped at the base of a terminal she thought looked like it could take the data chip. "There's some weird translation thing going on."

Melissa took a moment to respond. "Hmm. Interesting. It could be a translation program they engineered but it looks to be more likely from an automation process the Covenant picked up. Perhaps from a colony they hit."

"So if it's not you . . ." Nicole trailed off, holding the data chip in her hand. She glanced back at the dead Elite, wondering what in the galaxy was going on—what went on. A flash from the holo-image spun her gaze back around. The translation was now in blood red and seemed to stall. Numbers and alien characters began to slowly wink out of existence.

"Spartan," Melissa beckoned. "Get that chip in the data slot, _now_."

Nicole complied and slid the data chip into the terminal. At first,

nothing happened, but then the holo-image turned from a shade of red to green and the translation proceeded much faster than it had previously. It finished within the span of two long breaths and at its conclusion, the image vanished. "Melissa?"

Nothing.

"Captain, is Melissa still over there on _Apocolypso_?"

"This is Sorvad. The AI's avatar is still here on the bridge, but it looks to be frozen in a system lockup."

Not good. "Professor, should I pull out the data chip? I still don't have her over here either."

But before Sorvad could respond, Melissa's yellow image blossomed before Nicole at double the AI's normal size. "No need," she said casually, dismissing the action with a wave of her hand. "This will just take a moment."

It was three seconds, to be exact. All around Nicole, the bridge consoles sprang into life and the ship seemed to take one giant breath of air. The gravity felt surer underneath Nicole's feet and glowpanels illuminated to full brightness.

Melissa, looking around the bridge, seemed to admire her own work before nodding to Nicole. "There, much better."

Captain Greene's voice came back over the comm, tinier than before, as if it was being broadcasted directly from her lapel. "Spartan, hurry. We need you back here."

"On my way." She mentally calculated the time it would take her to head back to the airlock she had arrived through. Even at full sprint, it would still be a long time for the ONI crew to hold off an Elite boarding party. Nicole looked expectantly at Melissa's near life-size image at the center display. "Is it clear back there? Can you see if any more Covies are aboard?"

"I can do better than that." As Melissa's image diminished to near-normal size, a skeletal layout of the Corvette materialized beside her. Bathed in red, except for the bridge, most of the ship was in a state of lockdown. But one by one, starting from the bow and ending at the stern, corridors and compartments shifted from red to orange to green. "There," Melissa said satisfactorily, once the ship was fully engulfed in green. "No hostiles are currently present aboard this vessel."

"So they all boarded _Apocolypso_? How large was the crew?"

"Unknown." Melissa's face contorted. "There's something else in the system that's blocking my inquiries."

Nicole shook her head. "Just get the doors open for me so I can get back to _Apocolypso_."

The AI frowned and looked up again, the confusion slowly subsiding. "That will take too long." She pulled up a submenu and a dotted route appeared on the ship's image. "Take one of the escape pods on the

starboard side. I'll coordinate with myself aboard _Apocolypso_, maneuver the Corvette alongside it, and shoot you towards the blown airlock."

Nicole felt her brow rise out of reaction. "You, _what_?"

"Go now," Melissa pleaded. "I don't know if Greene's crew can stop them in time."

Nodding, she took off down the corridor. A waypoint appeared on her HUD and she turned the corner down a previously blocked hallway. Deep down she wasn't feeling all that confident in Melissa's ability to successfully complete an improvised cold-shirt transfer. The AI wasn't even her complete self on the Corvette but a fraction of her programming. Nicole had never before placed her life in hands of an AI quite like this.

If it worked, her opinion of ONI AI's would dramatically increase. If it didn't

A personal opinion would be the least of her worries.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Rolf came to a sudden stop when she heard the last explosion, and Thompson nearly crashed right into her.

"What?" the tech blurted out.

Rolf pointed forward and then down. "That last explosion was different."

"Yeah, it wasn't as big," Thompson commented distractedly. "It was probably farther away, like near the bridgeâ€"where _we_ should be by now."

"Not necessarily farther." Rolf crept up to a support arch and placed her ear against the cool metal. "There was a lot more clarity to the sound, not as muffled as before." She listened for anything else.

"C'mon," Thompson said through clenched teeth. "We have to hurry."

Another smaller explosion rang out, and this time a portion of the deck up ahead rattled loose from the connecting grates. And then the realization hit Sorenson. The Covenant boarding party was moving up through the ship, using plasma grenades to break through the thinner portions of the deck. She pushed away from the arch and gave Thompson a worried look. "We have to tell Captain Greene what theyâ€"

But before she could finish, a blast of blue light tore through the flooring five meters in front of them, pitching both women back against the corridor walls. Bits of shrapnel ripped through Rolf's trousers at shin height, causing instant pain to drop her in a heap on the ground.

When she landed on her side, she could see Thompson lying motionless with her eyes closed. The tech had a gash across her forehead, but her auburn hair that fell across her nose and mouth fluttered with her stuttered breaths. Thompson's limp form had rolled into the middle of the corridor, leaving her exposed to the hostiles that were sure to emerge from the blown out floor.

Rolf was about to attempt to get to her feet when a four-digit hand rose from the hole and began to feel around. Her breath seized in her chest. _Oh, no_. Another hand appeared and together they hauled up the bulk of a Sangheili warrior. Electric lighting seemed to play over his exterior, as if his shields were malfunctioning. He rose to his full height, nearly clipping the ceiling with his helmet, and turned in a complete circle before spotting Thompson's unmoving figure on the deck.

The Elite looked down through the way he had come and growled something, holding his hand in a fist. He then grabbed a handled device off his belt and squeezed it. A brilliant flash of white cracked into existence and took on the tell-tale shape of a Covenant Energy Sword.

He started for Thompson.

* * *

><p>Galin Thorm tried not to pace anxiously on Nagamo's bridge, but he couldn't help it. His ship was coming around on an intercept course that would join the two Prowlers in a maneuver to send his own security force to help combat the invading Covenant.

Captain Greene had taken the preparatory step and moved _Apocolypso_ far enough away from the Corvette to allow such boarding action to be held without Galin risking his own ship in a three-way collision. Her image flickered on the main viewscreen. "Galin, I'm picking up something from the Corvette."

"Sensors," he called over his shoulder.

The female officer nodded. "Sir, the Corvette is coming back online, slowly."

Through the viewport, Galin could see the Covenant vessel's cloaking system finally collapse to reveal a sleek-looking design covered in various shades of purple. Its exterior lights began to illuminate from bow to stern and massive shutters began to retract towards the front end of the ship.

"Spartan," Galin called over the comm. "What's going on over there?" The Corvette was now moving into a position parallel to _Apocolypso_.

On the viewscreen, Greene's image was replaced by Melissa's. "Captain Thorm, I'd recommend you move your ship aside for the time being. Spartan-458 will take point." She smiled.

"It's okay, Galin," Greene said over the comm, her voice surer than before. "Melissa knows what she's doing."

His dark brows met with confusion as he leaned forward to peer at the Corvette. The Covenant ship had performed a complete one-eighty from its previous position and as it slowed and steadied, Galin understood what was happening. Along the starboard side, a trio of egress hatches came into view just behind the 'head' of the Corvette and one of them was bathed in flashing red lights. "She's not doing what I think she's doing, is she?"

"Hold fast, Captain Thorm." Melissa gave a subtle wink and vanished from the viewscreen.

* * *

><p>Quietly and hastily, Rolf fumbled for her pistol. She could clearly see in the Elite's eyes that he was set on finishing off Thompson, and with the ship in alert-mode, the lack of overhead lighting concealed Rolf's presence next to the arch. Oddly enough, his armored hooves didn't stomp thunderously on the deck, and now he was just a few steps away from Thompson.<p>

Rolf could feel her heart beating in her head as she took aim at the approaching Elite. She forced her eyes to remain open and pulled the trigger three times.

Her first shot went high, ricocheting off the ceiling, and it caused the Sangheili to turn to face her. Her second shot struck her target in the shoulder between the folds of his armor, only partially slowing him down, but it did reveal the fact that his shields were completely collapsed with the sickening thud of a bullet piercing skin.

Her third and final shot hit him in the throat, just below his lower mandibles. The creature's eyes went wide and it dropped the Energy Sword, clutching at its ruined neck. The Elite fell forward, right on top of Rolf's injured right leg. She cried out in pain as the weight almost snapped her leg in half. She immediately tried to push the dying Sangheili off, but it was of no use. Rolf straightened her foot and tried to squeeze out from underneath when she saw the pair of enemy warriors nearly fly up through the hole in the deck.

Somewhere in the dying Elite's collapse, Rolf had dropped her M6. She frantically felt around for it, keeping her gaze of sheer terror locked on the two approaching Sangheili. When she found the barrel of the pistol it was too late. The nearest Elite pulled his fallen comrade off of Rolf and picked her up by the tuft of her jacket.

She struggled in his grasp, landing futile blows against his outstretched arm, as he hauled her into the light of an emergency glowpanel. Rolf's eyes locked with his, knowing she was about to die. The snap-hiss from his Energy Sword powering up was enough to tell her so.

He spoke something unintelligible in his native tongue and raised his sword.

"_D'alnik!_" the other Elite shouted, quickly stepping forward to delay Rolf's execution. "_D'alnik_" he repeated, this time much quieter and calmer. He pointed to the ONI ranking marks on Rolf's jacket and mumbled something in their language.

The Elite that still had Rolf in a death grip looked at the jacket's rank markings and then motioned with his sword to their fallen warrior.

The Talkative One shook his head and pointed down the corridor towards the bridge. He spoke words only four mandibles could produce and the other Elite practically threw Rolf right into his arms. He made a gesture suggesting if the Talkative One wanted Rolf alive than he would have to take her.

Rolf felt the Talkative One's hand tighten around her upper right arm and effortlessly drag her along in his wake. She was spun halfway around and could see more Elites rising up from the blown-out hole. The others chose to ignore Thompson and instead the entire group pressed on ahead.

The thought of being a Covenant prisoner made her stomach a frozen pit, but that fact that she wasn't dead yet made her wonder why. She looked at the rank insignia the Elites had pointed out. Beneath the dual silver bars was stitched a pair of red wings. _That's it. They must think I'm Second Officer Lieutenant Hyde_.

She gulped. _And since Second Officers have access to the bridge and ultimately control of the ship, then they won't need anyone else alive_.

* * *

><p>The timer on her heads-up-display counted down the last few seconds and Nicole refused to close her eyes in preparation for the escape pod to propel her towards Apocolypso. The pod was claustrophobically small and none of the harnesses fit her frame. She literally held on by the seat of her armor.

"Hold on," Melissa's voice squirmed into her thoughts. "I've programmed the pod to reverse its thrust when it is within 25 meters of _Apocolypso_'s hull, but the impact will still be intense." She paused. "At least according to my calculations."

The pull of gravity pinned her in place, as the escape pod ejected from its launch tube. Once clear of the Corvette, there was a moment of complete silence as the pod traveled the short distance between the two ships' gravity generator fields. Without Melissa's warning, the pod's forward thrusters roared to life, trying to bring the forward momentum under a near-insane velocity. Nicole braced herself against the frame of the pod, her hands pressed above her head. The blue diamond waypoint that Melissa provided on Nicole's HUD was rapidly approaching.

She couldn't help it. She closed her eyes when the waypoint was ten meters away. What was left of the docking collar had already been jettisoned, but the blast hatch was only partially torn away, leaving barely enough room for the pod to slip through. Metal scrapped upon metal, but the escape pod squeezed through the opening with jarring force. The pod immediately lost integrity and Nicole had to pull her left hand away from the inner wall of the pod to spare it from being torn in half. A sharp metal edge ripped through the left side of the pod and she suddenly found herself falling forward, no longer able to support herself.

As the pod began to ricochet inside the airlock, Nicole knew she had to exit before she was spewed back out into space. But she was now tumbling inside of the cramped confines, pinned to one side and then the next. Her right hand found purchase on one of the jumpseat's arms, and with her left fist she slammed down on the hatch release button at the base of the seat. The hatch she was half leaning against sprang open in an instantâ€”only to be ripped from its hinges when it collided with one of the airlock walls.

Nicole began to tumble out of the pod headfirst, ducking out of fear of getting her helmet pulled off. When she was fully extricated, she realized how lucky she was. The pod was on its way back out, seemingly dropping off its ONI package, fulfilling its mission, and leaving for another pickup. Her magnetic-locking boots sealed against the ceiling and Nicole braced herself against a bulkhead.

Melissa's voice came over the comm. "Standby, Spartan, for the blast doors on your leftâ€”I mean, right."

Nicole looked over and found the sealed doors slowly opening. Once there was a gap large enough to permit passage, she reached for the upper frame and pulled herself through. Melissa obligingly shut the blast doors behind her. Once the room pressurized, Nicole let the ship's gravity pull her back to the grated floor.

"Well, that worked out better than I imagined it would," the AI said, self-satisfactorily.

Ignoring the comment, Nicole brandished her MA5B and was about to head for the nearest lift when she noticed a roughly rounded portion of the ceiling had collapsed upward into the deck above. She walked over to stare up through it and holstered her rifle. With one easy jump and some arm strength, she was up and through to the next deck. Farther forward on Deck 2, she found a similar hole above. Sneaky. They kept going up so Greene couldn't lock down the decks to trap them.

She found no one around, not even victims of the Covenant boarding party. Nicole didn't know if that was a good sign or bad. Maybe Greene runs a tighter ship than I gave her credit for.

After pulling herself up to a darkened Deck 5 she could see faint movement at the forward edges of her motion tracker. The enemy was heading for the bridge. A cough from behind caused Nicole to spin around. She whipped out her pistol and took aim at the Elite on the ground in one swift motion. Nicole walked forward, kicked the unmoving Sangheili's side, and flipped him over on his back with a lift of her boot. Blood had now stopped from streaming down its neck and chest and she could see two wounds, shoulder and throat.

Her eyes darted to the right and she found the source of the coughing. A redhead was lying on her side, eyes closed and breathing shallowly. "Melissa, can you get a medteam down here?" Holstering her M6, she swapped for her rifle. "I've got a live one, but the Covies are getting away."

The redhead coughed again but this time words came out between them. "They . . . took . . . her."

Nicole knelt down beside her. "Who?"

"Sorenson," she said, her eyes opening, only to have them roll back into her head.

Melissa's icon appeared in the upper right corner of Nicole's HUD. "Rolf Sorenson is the brevet Second Officer. She'll have the necessary keycodes to access the bridge."

Nicole swore to herself. "Tell Captain Greene we might have a hostage situation on our hands." She nodded to the redhead. "Stay still. A medteam will be here shortly." She rose to her feet and started for the bridge.

With Sorenson's passcodes, the enemy had abandoned the blasting-through-bulkheads strategy and was moving straight for their target. Nicole knew they would have to breach the security foyer, but even with an ONI security team bunkered in defensively, the Covenant would stop at nothing to reach the bridge.

It took a mere handful of seconds before she could detect the Elites ahead, and a few more seconds to actually see them. Marching in an ordered cadence, there was six of them. _No, seven?_ They seemed to be focused solely ahead, but the rear guard would spare furtive glances behind them. But Nicole was a Spartan and knew how to tail her prey.

Hiding in the shadows and moving from doorway to bulkhead, she silently crept along in their wake. Nicole reached around, locked her MA5B onto her back, and pulled out her combat knife. In the soon-to-be close quarters, she knew hand-to-hand was the better solution.

It was also her most deadly form of combat.

When the rear guard looked forward again, she sprang into action.

* * *

><p>Rolf cringed from the pain in her shin with every half step she took, but the Sangheili dragging her along didn't seem to care for her discomfort, only in her usefulness. The two forward-most Elites parted like they had for the last three times and the Talkative Oneâ€"which Rolf took as their leaderâ€"pushed her forward and grabbed her wrist, forcing it onto the touchplate.<p>

Behind her she heard a staccato of sounds, like metal ripping through a slab of meat and a sack of potatoes falling off a table. She tried to look over her shoulder but was shoved to the ground before she could make out what was happening. Rolf caught herself with her hands, spun around on her backside, and landed on the ground, leaning against the door.

And then her breath seized in her throat.

Moving like a blurred phantom among Sangheili statues of a scenic war monument, the Spartan flew through the ranks of Elites, slashing and pushing off of the multiple targets. Four Elites were dead before the other three could even react.

Finally, one of the forward guards activated his Energy Sword and

lunged for the Spartan. But the green armor-clad soldier merely sidestepped and used her left forearm to brush the attack aside. Using his own momentum, she spun around against the right side of the Elite, and plunged her knife deep into his back. But just as gracefully as before, she pulled her weapon free and moved on to her last two targets.

The Sangheili leader barked something at the last guard and the minion activated his Energy Sword in response. The Spartan, who was finally still long enough to stay in focus for Rolf, flicked her wrist and sent the knife flying through the air at the last guard. The projectile pierced through its target's neck, silencing the Elite in a heap on the ground. Oddly, the Spartan seemed to straighten up and gave a beckoning lift of the chin to the last Elite.

The Leader instead reached behind him for Rolf, hoping to use her as a human shield, but the double doors finally parted and she fell backwards into the next section. Pushing herself farther away, Rolf scampered to her feet. The Elite, realizing his tactic wouldn't work, turned back to the oncoming Spartan but was subsequently silenced when the bulk of the green armored shoulder rammed into his torso.

The two fell recklessly to the grated floor, but the Spartan had managed to come out on top. Before the Elite could clear the stars that were most definitely clouding his eyes, the Spartan landed several flat-handed jabs across his throat, followed by several straight punches to his face. When the Elite relented, the Spartan pulled out her pistol and fired a single shot up against the folds in his chest armor. The Sangheili fell limp.

Without resting for a single second, the Spartan rose up and walked back through the bloody scene to examine the unmoving, only needing to double-tap one of her victims. When she had reached the two rear guards, the Spartan finally looked up at Rolf and nodded.

Rolf was at a loss for words. One moment she was a Covenant slave that was destined for death, and the next she was a spectator to the most gallant fighting machine she had ever seen. It was almost picturesque, the way the Spartan stood tall, backlit by the flashing emergency glowpanels and brandishing her blood-dripped pistol. Rolf was taken aback.

"You okay?" the female Spartan asked.

Unable to speak, she nodded, and then immediately winced when the adrenaline subsided in her system and the pain in her shin rose up again. Rolf didn't spare a look; she couldn't take her eyes off of the Spartan.

"Hold on." The Spartan looked down and seemed to be communicating with someone over her comm. After a few moments, she holstered her M6 and pulled out her rifle.

Behind her, a stampede of armed ONI personnel flooded into the corridor and the Spartan led a handful of them towards the aft of the ship. Rolf watched absently at the departing Spartan as medtechs began to surround her. Even when the Captain came to her side and gave her a worried look, Rolf couldn't help quell the fluttering of admiration, terror, and jubilee in her stomach.

The battle was over and she had lived through itâ€”thanks to the bravery of Spartan-458.

9. Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Amanda Greene surveyed the interior damage with a sobering expression. We were damn lucky. She stepped over another juttied-out piece of metal from the floor and gave Galin a sideways stare. "I'm begging to think that someone at HIGHCOM is specifically looking out for us."

Galin cracked a smile and wet his lips with his tongue. "Spartans sure do come in handy."

"Apparently one is all we need." She waved a hand at the hole in the deck. "Is it just me, or did it seem like these Elites knew how to breach an ONI Prowler a bit too easily? If we didn't have 458 with us, I'm not sure we could have won this battle."

One of Galin's eyebrows rose. "Didn't one of your officers take down an Elite?"

"Sorenson, yes." Her eyes defocused for a moment. "She's in the medbay right now and should be fit to return in a couple of days."

"Tough girl."

"Tough woman," Greene corrected. "She's been through a lot already and today will definitely test her resolve." As they continued to head towards Apocolypso's bridge, cleanup crews hugged the walls as they passed. "Others weren't so lucky," she continued. "12 dead and four in the medbay."

"I'm sorry," Galin said, momentarily stepping behind her as they entered the bridge.

The bridge was a flurry of activity. Techs were pouring over the data Melissa kept streaming to them from the Covenant Corvette that hung just outside the main viewport. Now that it was fully uncloaked, the enemy vessel appeared in all of its purple-hued glory. It looked sleeker than the traditional Corvette design while still maintaining the overall shape. Large shutter-like panels sloped down from the spine of the ship to shield its weapons arrays, while a conical panel had retracted over the upper docking port, large enough to accommodate both Apocolypso and Nagamo.

Amanda glanced down at Professor Sorvad, still occupying Sorenson's station. He was going over the Corvette's AI matrix details with practiced ease, his screen flickering with each page of data he flipped through. "Staying busy, Professor?"

He merely muttered something and raised his head slightly before returning to his examination.

Melissa's voice interrupted any further non-conversation. "Ah,

Captain, I have something for you." The main tactical holo-table switched from a static holo of _Apocolypso_'s damage assessments to a holo of the Corvette. One tech that was holding a datapad over the table seemed to perk up with a 'hey, I was using that' look, rolled his eyes and moved back to his personal terminal.

Greene nodded. "Go ahead, Melissa."

The AI stood a bit more upright, arching her back like a cadet lining up for inspection. "The Covenant vessel is known as _Eye of Kaaran_. It is a deep-space reconnaissance ship, part of an eight-ship detachment. Their general task was to survey vast areas of space behind enemy lines—ours, search for possible holes in our sensor nets, and report back on a time-table synced with their main fleet."

Galin frowned. "I've never heard of this kind of Covenant tactic. Their numbers and technology would make this sort of sneaking around trite."

"Or maybe they're finally offering us some respect," Greene commented.

Galin snorted. "Funny way of showing it."

Melissa continued, her avatar's eyes narrowing. "_Eye of Kaaran_ was unique, though. Rouge, more like it," she corrected. "The Shipmaster's private logs state that it had a captured Human AI aboard, and they were using it to help plot course jumps." Her eyes widened. "That's what I detected when Spartan-458 accessed the bridge computer," she breathed. "It wasn't a Covenant AI, but a _Human_ AI." She held up a hand. "One moment." Her image vanished.

Amanda spun around and faced her fellow Captain. "How is that even possible? AIs are supposed to purge their data if captured. How could they have secured a UNSC asset?"

A gruff, accented voice answered. "Because it wasn't from the United Nations Space Command." Laszlo Sorvad rose from his seat and folded his arms across his chest. "Well, it wasn't 'commissioned' from the UNSC. Not through normal channels, that is."

Galin frowned. "How would you know this?"

He motioned to his screen. "The data fragments Melissa's been downloading from the Corvette. The Shipmaster took great lengths to operate without cataloging the Human AI's presence in his systems. All navigation corrections were entered manually, as if he was consulting this AI for directions." He took a deep breath. "Unless the AI had gone rampant and started divulging information to the enemy, there's no possible way for it to be a 'traditional' AI."

Greene did still not fully believe all of this. "And how did you know _that_?"

"Because I was consulted for the work done on this batch of UNSC's Artificial Intelligence projects." He caught the staggered glances of many of the bridge crew and shook his head. "There's much more I can discuss, but I'm sure it is classified."

Melissa returned, but with a shift in her Avatar's colorâ€”it had a slight greenish tint to it. She noticed the worried look from Greene and held up her hand. "I'm just connecting with my fragment aboard Kaaran." The green color eventually flickered and soon vanished. She nodded, as if satisfied with an unseen consultation. "The Human AI was once called Adonis. Its core is too badly damaged to piece together its origins, but base upon its name, it was most likely made in the Eridanus System." She leaned in. "Adonis was the name of a research station that has since been shut down."

Galin stirred beside Amanda. "I know that name. That was a base the Insurrectionists seized during the Second Blitz." His expression changed to outright disgust. "Is this an Innie AI?"

Sorvad snorted, matching Galin's look. "Impossible. They wouldn't even know how to turn on the Data Processors, let alone inhibit an AI."

Amanda frowned and returned her eyes back to Melissa. "Is there any way of knowing how much information the Covenant was able to glean from Adonis?"

"Unknown." She tilted her head to the side. "Though you will find this an interesting note." Melissa switched the tactical holo-image of the Corvette to display a series of reddened areas and flashing numbers throughout Eye of Kaaran's image. "It seems Adonis was the cause of the Corvette's dereliction." She leaned her head forward ever so slightly. "And Adonis was the reason why there were so few Covenant left alive."

"Wait, what?" Amanda asked, confused.

"The security breach codec is laced with classic UNSC-style coding, only a Human AI would think to use." Melissa smirked. "We AIs are something that the Covenant can't possibly begin to understand the impact we have on this war."

A portion of the holo-image brightened and the view zoomed in. "A power surge in the reactor crippled every vital system on the Corvette." Melissa let a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. "And it wasn't a radiation spike. You are all free to venture onto the enemy ship."

Amanda motioned with her hand. "Continue."

"The surge was so great that it caused a depressurization in every compartment, pretty much killing anyone not in a Stasis Pod."

"Stasis Pods? I didn't even know the Covenant used that sort of tech," Galin commented.

"Deep space reconnaissance, remember?" Amanda chided.

Melissa went on. "Since the power surge happened right before a slipspace jump, every system that was active was caught in a feedback loop, thus the reason for the abnormal gravity and cloaking fluctuations. But before you ask, no, Adonis did not survive the surge. Just a fragment remains behind. Nothing more than an

abbreviated string of its mission log dating back only since its capture several months previous."

Amanda wanted to sit down and mull over all of this. With all of the information being dumped on them, it was a lot to take in and analyze. "So if this was a 'rogue Shipmaster' is it safe to assume that no other Covenant vessel will come looking for _Eye of Kaaran_?"

Melissa shook her head. "Highly unlikely. The Shipmaster's acquiring of Adonis or use of the AI was never entered into the mission logs, thus their plot points would not have been transmitted until their return to their fleet, for security reasons. So it's very possible that this Shipmaster was willingly operating his vessel in a 'heretical' fashion, as the Covenant would put it."

Amanda heaved a sigh and turned to Galin. "Who's going to call this one in to HIGHCOM?"

The older Captain shook his head and braced himself against the tactical display with stiff arms. "This is almost too good to be true. We now have a Covenant Corvette in our possession, previously unknown enemy tactics, and we've halted their chance to learn more about UNSC-controlled space."

Professor Sorvad walked up to stand beside Galin. "Captains, I'm concerned about this AI, Adonis." He scratched at his beard thoughtfully. "It isn't a well-known fact, but the Covenant deems AIs in general as untrustworthy, vile, and should be avoided at all costs."

"Your point, Professor?" Galin asked.

"This could be a shift in military doctrine for the Covenant." He motioned to Melissa's avatar. "As she has stated, it seems the Shipmaster was operating with Adonis unbeknownst to the rest of the Fleet. But if it was _commissioned_ by their hierarchy, this could be the makings of something bigger and far more hazardous than a simple scouting mission."

Amanda perked up and let that idea roll around in her mind. According to ONI reports, the Sangheili are not known for their technological prowess when it comes to engineering programmatic systems. _Is it possible that a group of Insurrectionists could have manufactured an AI and it fell into this Shipmaster's hands?_ Many other thoughts were racing around, but Melissa's head came up and the floating image of _Eye of Kaaran_ was replaced with a star chart.

"Captain, there's more." Melissa pointed to the floating image of star systems, and interconnecting lines began to form, marking a series of slipspace jumps for the Corvette. "Based upon the Covenant's calendar dating system, _Eye of Kaaran_ is supposed to meet upâ€"was supposed to meet upâ€"with another ship, the Frigate _Dawning Prospect_. The rendezvous window only lasts for another 18 hours."

Amanda leaned forward over the tactical display. "Show me."

The view zoomed in on a single Covenant ship located somewhere in interstellar space. Hovering above the red silhouette was a counter

ticking down from 18 hours and 6 minutes. "Distance to the Dawning Prospect's rendezvous is approximately 11,000 light years away," the AI explained.

Galin snorted. "That will take us almost 6 months to get to."

A brief glint of reflective light that came through the main viewport caught Amanda's eye. She looked up and saw Eye of Karaan outside, and it seemed as if it had just winked at her. A smile spread across her lips. "But only 12 hours via the Corvette." She looked over at Melissa. "Right?"

"Approximately."

Over the bridge's comm, Jovan transmitted his protest. "You can't be serious," Nagamo's AI put it bluntly. "Protocol dictates that we contact HIGHCOM back on Reach and hold station until a salvage crew can arrive. There's no need to go off gallivanting around to find this Corvette's next pit-stop."

Kandis Jokling, calling from Nagamo's bridge, put in her uneasiness as well. Her voice sounded more hesitant and thin over the comm. "I agree with Jovan. And Galin, you know how much I hate doing that. Let's regroup with the Fleet and have a couple Destroyers meet up with the Covenant Frigate. That will show them how not to go snooping around in our backyard."

Melissa shook her head. "We will only have one shot at this, Lieutenant. And Jovan, you know how ONI encourages those that take initiative."

Jovan harrumphed. "This is not my idea of 'taking the initiative when appropriate,' Melissa. More like dipping one's feet into quicksand and testing its depths."

Amanda snapped her fingers to forestall anymore AI bickering. "Let's run the scenario out. We take the Corvette to the rendezvous, and then what? We either blast Dawning Prospect out of the sky or we fake our way into following it."

Galin folded his arms across his chest. "And then to where? One less Covenant Frigate caught with its shields down won't mean much to the war effort."

"That might not be all that awaits." Professor Sorvad came around to the opposite side of the tactical display to stare at both captains. He placed his datapad down and pointed it. "If my calculations are correct, then this rendezvous would be the final stop before the Corvette would return to its fleet."

One of Amanda's eyebrows rose. "Are you suggesting we jump head on in to a massing Covenant Fleet?"

A mixed look of confidence and worry crept across the old professor's face. "Not just any fleet, but a Resource Fleet." He hit the transmit button on his datapad and the tactical display switched to a holo of nearly three dozen Covenant ships varying in size and shape. The largest were twelve massive freighters and four refueling vessels large enough to eclipse the biggest ship the UNSC had to offer.

"I was getting to that, Professor." Melissa said, slightly bitterly.

"It was buried in one of Adonis' memory fragments," Sorvad said, his back straightening. "Part of his programming was still collecting data from the Corvette's main computer. It seems that this particular detachment of the Covenant Fleet was on the cusp of sending in a resource fleet to begin the first staging ground of an invasion task force."

Amanda stared at the floating image of the resource fleet, wondering how in the galaxy that a simple slipspace anomaly could have lead them to stumble upon the Covenant preparing a massive campaign to stage an invasion. "Melissa, can you confirm this?"

"The Professor is correct," the AI said. "Upon further examination of the logs and searching through portions of the crew's journals, a resource fleet is waiting for the 'all clear,' so to speak." She paused and tilted her head to the left. "Though I'm afraid our window is closing for good."

Galin frowned. "Explain."

"To preserve secrecy, from us and possibly other Covenant fleets, the rendezvous ships would only hold station for the duration of the meeting window. After that window is closed, they will return to the fleet and assume that the scout ships that did not report in were either destroyed by enemy forces or encountered hazardous anomalies, thus deterring the fleet to move in." Melissa motioned to the holo on the tactical display. "And they could either decide to return to the Main Fleet or move in to another system that another scout ship has deemed safe."

"Ah," Sorvad breathed. "So that is why the Shipmaster kept Adonis from the mission logs. He wanted to be the one to locate the proper system from which to invade, stealing the glory for himself, perhaps. With a Human AI aboard, he was certain to win the prize."

The bridge was silent for a moment. Perhaps everyone was pondering the same question of 'what do we do now?' Amanda knew this sort of action, to pursue a lead this big, was risking more than just her reputation. "Let's play this out." She was big into war-gaming and it usually helped map out a plan more easily than reciting Naval handbook excerpts. "If we meet up with Dawning Prospect and convince them to 'lead the way'," she said using air quotes, "then we'll follow it to the Resource Fleet where we could . . ."

She trailed off and frowned. "Well, what can we do? I mean we either take the Corvette and either Nagamo or Apocolypso trails behindâ€" "

"Captain," Melissa perked up. "Both Prowlers can dock on the Corvette's dorsal bay. It would be a tight fit, but I'm sure Jovan and I can make sure we don't scrape the outer hulls and vent atmosphere."

"And that would make the trip shorter and on time, considering we get moving within the next 5 hours," Galin added.

"Okay," Amanda conceded, "but that still puts us in a place to decide

what to do about _Dawning Prospect_. Say we are able to pilot the Corvette to the meet-up, how do we convince them that we're not humans?"

Melissa gave a conspiratorial smile. "We won't have to speak for ourselves." She pointed to the display and a string of paragraphs containing waveform readouts above every few lines appeared. "Not only did the Shipmaster keep a set of mission logs, but he dictated them as well." She snapped her fingers and the alien voice came over the bridge PA. The volume died down as Melissa continued to explain. "The language translation software isn't the best, but I figure we can 'fake' our way through, as Captain Greene has suggested. Using the vocabulary the Shipmaster used I'm sure I could splice sentences together, but I wouldn't want to risk any long, drawn out conversations."

"I don't know." Not fully convinced, Amanda turned to look at Galin. "What do you think? Do we go into the lion's den and hope we don't get mauled to death?"

"The Covenant stand on ceremony," Galin said soberly. "While we might be able to bluff our way to the Resource Fleet, I doubt we'll make it much further. We aren't completely unarmed, and if we map out a strategy we could take a good portion of them out." He scratched at his beard. "But on the other hand, if we let this Covenant Fleet carry on, we may never know their whereabouts until they're blasting through our defensive grids on Reach."

Amanda nodded in agreement. "We can't let this Covenant detachment go without a fight." She looked over at the AI pedestal. "Can you do all of this, Melissa? Everything is riding on you to communicate with _Dawning Prospect_ and possible the commander of this resource fleet."

Melissa stood tall. "With almost certainty." She glanced over to the Sorvad. "I'm sure the Professor could offer his expertise as well."

Sorvad nodded. "Absolutely."

"Then it's settled," Galin said, pushing himself off the tactical display and looking around the bridge. "Amanda, we'll need a crew to help Melissa with the Corvette's systems. I already have a few officers I could commit, and I'll have them sent over to the Corvette ASAP." He stepped closer to her and lowered his voice. "Only one of us has to go. You could head back to Reach and report on all of this."

"And leave us waiting 6 months for your return?" Amanda shook her head. "If we go down, we go down together, Galin. Besides, two Prowlers verses an entire Covenant fleet double our chances of success," she added lightly.

"Alright, then." Galin's eyebrows rose and fell in a whimsical fashion. "Let's both torpedo our careers into the sun."

Amanda raised her voice. "Alright people. Let's begin."

As she started to issue orders, Melissa's AI fragment aboard the Corvette brought the captured vessel around and opened up the dorsal

docking bay. The crew that was previously working on the interior patchwork of _Apocolypso_ would soon be reinforcing hatches and compartments aboard the Corvette.

Amanda knew which officers she would want aboard _Eye of Kaaran_, and she was hoping one's recovery would speed up in time before the inevitable firefight began.

* * *

><p>Nicole had finished her sweep of Apocolypso and was about to report to the bridge, when she recalled the injured woman from before, the one she had freed from her hinge-head captors. The medbay was on the way, so she decided to see if she was still alive. Nicole had medical training, of course, but she wasn't aware of how severely the woman was injured prior to her captivity and subsequent freedom. She wasn't even sure why she was particularly interested in this woman, but something down inside wanted to make sure she was okay.

The medbay was filled with personnel speed-walking from one room to another, most of them carrying charts or trays filled with meds. One male medtech caught her attention and he slid to a halt in front of her.

"Spartan, are you injured?" he asked, already waving a team over.

Nicole held up a hand. "No, I'm looking for . . ." She trailed off when she realized she didn't know the woman's name. But she did know her appearance. "I'm looking for a young woman, blonde hair, freckled face, and kind of short."

As the medtech frowned about this peculiar, out-of-bounds request, more people began to slow their pace and stopped to gawk at the armor-clad soldier holding up the main foyer. "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure who that is."

A female medtech stepped forward. "I know who that is. You can follow me." She led Nicole into a dark side room and motioned for her to enter after. "She's resting now."

When Nicole's visor adjusted to the dim lighting, she could see the petite woman lying on her stomach in an oversized bed. Her head was facing away from the door and bandages were wrapped around calves and thighs. A medical gown didn't do a very good job of covering up her backside, and the medtech situated the gown to preserve the girl's modesty.

But not before Nicole could get the idea that this injured woman did well to keep her body in shape. Nicole frowned to herself. It wasn't that the observation was inaccurate but rather that she had drawn to the conclusion that she did for reasons other than seeing the girl's bare flesh. It was an odd sensation. One that she had learned to suppress long ago, but the fact that it had came up suddenly and without warning was alarming to her.

"How bad is she?" Nicole asked quickly and a bit too loudly. The girl stirred but remained face down. "Is she going to be okay?" she asked in a whisper instead.

"Yes, very much so." The medtech grabbed the datapad at the end of the bed and examined it for a moment. "Minor lacerations and bruising. We still need to do a few more tests for a possible concussion, but she'll be fit for duty sooner than we initially anticipated."

"Good." Nicole nodded for emphasis. Sometimes it was hard to communicate Spartan emotions with simply words. And yet, she was feeling the worst sort at an even more awkward time. "What's her name?" she forced out.

"Rolf Sorenson." The medtech paused. "Would you like me to tell her you visited?"

"Um, I don't . . ." Nicole trailed off when Rolf began to stir again. Anxiousness flooded into her and she suddenly wanted to leave, wondering why she had ever come by. "I need to be going." She hurried out of the room and into the main corridor, not even sure where she was going.

When she finally did stop it was in the doorway of her private quarters. Nicole hesitated, realizing that being alone would propagate dealing with her thoughts and emotions that should not have been materialized. She hissed out a sigh and closed the door behind her. Removing her helmet, she plopped down at the edge of the bed and tried her best to hold back the tears.

During the augmentation process, she had reacted differently to the gene therapy. Where most subjects' hormones were suppressed in some areas and raised in others, Nicole's body acted almost uncontrollably. Her heightened abilities were there but her glands went through a variety of changes, nearly killing her in the process. When she had been finally cleared by the doctors, she was told to report any abnormalities of her hormones ramping up her sexuality. It was told that such feelings and desires had no place in a Spartan. The subsequent tests showed the possibility of such results, but Nicole had found ways to suppress them.

Apparently until now. Nicole sunk down to the floor, letting her crying lull her into some form of distant comfort she had once known. She was more upset that she wasn't able to control her body, mind, and emotions like she had done so before. She wasn't even sure if she was truly attracted to other women or guys or anything, but the slightest stirring deep down in her had always been something she could squelch.

Maybe this is just a passing thing, she told herself. It was rare to see another human in such vulnerable circumstances, and yet she realized it wasn't that much of a catalyst as it was an indicator that her body's natural tendencies were taking root again. In the preliminary augmentation, puberty was nothing more than a growth spurt and not a transitional time in a girl's life, and now at age 16, she was experiencing those tingling sensations in a new way.

Nicole wasn't even sure if she could mention any of this to Halsey or her commanding officer in fear of being removed from her combat role. Her head rose up and she inhaled sharply. Is that why they have kept me off the front lines for so long? Did Halsey know that I was

susceptible to this 'thing' and concluded that I would be a danger to other Spartans around me?_ She cried out in frustration and slammed her fist into the floor, causing the material to flex and break to reveal piping and wires underneath. Nicole forced her hands open and tried to breathe evenly.

Now wasn't the time and this wasn't the place to throw herself into such deep questions. She had to pull herself together and focus. Focus on saving lives. Focus on following orders. And not giving in to lustful thoughts that could distract her. Nicole blinked away the last few tears and pulled the edge of her bed sheet over to wipe her face off. Whatever changes her body was now subject to, she needed to see this mission through to the end. And maybe when she was back home on Reach, she might talk to Dr. Halsey.

Maybe.

A ping on her desk console made her bolt upright. It was the AI Melissa's voice and not her image that entered her quarters. "Captain Greene is requesting your presence on the bridge, Spartan."

"Starting a debriefing already?" she asked, hoping to mask the waver in her voice.

"Not at all. In fact, I think things are about to get much more complicated."

"How's that?" she asked, donning on her helmet.

The AI paused, more for amusement than dramatics, Nicole was sure. "You'll just have to find out on the bridge, now, won't you?"

10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Galin Thorm caught Kandis Jokling's eye when he stepped onto Nagamo's bridge. His ship had just successfully docked in the dorsal bay of the Corvette and he was returning to oversee the final preparations for their collective jump to the rendezvous with Dawning Prospect. He knew Kandis was completely against this charade, but she had enough professionalism in her not to bring it up in front of the crew. Still, her gaze was strong enough that he could almost feel it against the back of his head.

"Report," he said simply.

Jovan appeared in an instant. "Aside from a few scrapes of paint, we managed a safe landing. The personnel you requested are gathering equipment to take with them to the Corvette's bridge. All stations are reporting battle-readiness."

"Very good." He turned to face Kandis and gave a microscopic nod. "Jovan, please keep me posted once the Corvette is cleared for slipspace." He started for the exit. When he was clear of the closing doors, he talked without looking over his shoulder. "I suppose you have an objection?"

Kandis sighed and joined him at his side. "I just wish you could see the career course you're plotting. We are pretty much making things up as we go and there are procedures that ONI is use to enforcing."

"I consider this a grey area, Kandis." He stopped in front of the trio of lifts at the end of the corridor's t-junction and hit the DOWN button. "You know how important this could be, what all is at stake." The lift doors on the right opened and he stepped inside, turning to face Kandis in the process. "This is bigger than just future retirement benefits." He tilted his head to the side and frowned. "Do you not feel comfortable taking command of the Corvette as Brevet Captain?"

"No, I'll be fine. I've been in charge of more ship-types than you anyway." Kandis joined him in the lift and the doors closed behind her. "What I need from you is to promise me that you won't risk anything else." Her hands rose and held his face gently. "Once we are done with all of this, and ONI deals whatever judgment it has waiting for us," she started, her deep blue eyes as serious as ever. "Will you tell your wife about us so we can finally be together without fear of being found out?"

Galin frowned and took her hands in his. "Is this why you have been so distant these past few days? Are you looking for a long-term commitment from me?"

She blinked her eyes invitingly. "Is that so much to ask?"

He snorted. "Well, yes." Galin quickly squeezed her hands and wrapped her in his arms. "But I know it's something that is important to you." He held her tightly and then pulled her away to look into her face. "And I'm willing to discuss it further when things settle down for a bit."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth and she kissed him fully on the lips. "Promise?" she whispered.

"I promise." He kissed her again with more intensity, felt his pulse begin to quicken, and he pressed his body against hers.

A chime from the lift interrupted any further passion play, and they pulled away before the doors opened. Galin straightened his uniform and stepped onto the lower level. He spun back around and caught Kandis smiling while mouthing the words "meet me in my cabin" to him. The doors shut and he tried to keep the smile from his face. Passion would definitely be later, but now was the time to prepare for battle.

He marched down the hallway and into the ready room where the six individuals he had chosen for the Corvette had gathered. He looked into each one's face before he began. "From here on out, things are going to look very different when it comes to orders. For now, Captain Greene and I will take joint control over the mission, but I'm trusting you will act without waver if for whatever reason the Corvette comes under attack. Lieutenant Jokling will be in charge of the Corvette, and I expect you treat her as the Captain that she is."

He let that sink in a moment before continuing. "While we have an

idea of enemy strengths, we don't currently know their weaknesses. If and when we find them, be quick to carry out your orders. It may come down to split-second timing and with the AI Melissa already in the Corvette's systems, I hope that you will respect her abilities and trust both her decisions and those of the LT." He looked them over once more before nodding slowly. "Dismissed."

The six crewmen, ranging from backup communications officers to fire control operators, gathered their things and headed for the exit ramp. Galin followed them down after they had cleared the ramp and stopped short of stepping onto the Corvette. From across the docking bay, he could see _Apocolypso_'s own "select few" making their way onto the Corvette's pink deck. Captain Greene appeared much in the same way as Galin and he offered her a long-distance salute. She returned it and then returned to the belly of her ship.

Galin's brow creased when he did a quick headcount on the crewmen leaving Greene's ship. They were one short. _And down one Spartan, for that matter_. He wanted to call over to the other ONI ship but knew Greene would inform him if there were any major changes. According to the timeframe, the crews were to have settled in and Melissa would give them a shakedown of how to interface with the controls. The AI had mentioned overlaying the Covenant symbols with a language the humans understood, but it still involved a matter of tweaking. All in all, if things went to plan, they would be off to the rendezvous in less than two hours, leaving them a two hour cushion.

And leaving him a moment's respite with Kandis. It would have to be quick, but that had never stopped them before. Taking a deep breath, he marched back into _Nagamo_'s hold.

From the medroom's doorway, Amanda watched Rolf closely. While her movements seemed slow they were not too labored. The younger woman shifted uneasily on the edge of her bed, but managed a smile. It was a good sign. "How are you feeling, Sorenson?"

"Much better, Captain." She tucked a loose lock of blonde hair behind her left ear. "These pain blockers are doing wonders, but I'm already scaling back my dosage. The medtechs tell me I'll be fit for duty soon."

Amanda caught the attending medtech's eye. It was Amanda that requested for the medical team to try to speed up Sorenson's recovery in any way. After authorizing the necessary treatments, Rolf had improved drastically overnight. Some would look at the Captain's diverting of resources an abuse of power, but she needed the young woman to be on that Corvette. It was more of a reaction to a gut feeling than basic protocol.

The Captain walked over and stood in front of Rolf, giving her a look of pure clinical concentration. "Well, will you be ready in an hour? I'd like for you to join the crew aboard the Corvette."

Rolf pushed off the bed slowly and stood on sure footing. "I'm pretty sure I can. Don't know how much good I can do over there, though."

"You'll be acting as Lieutenant Jokling's First Officer, and you'll offer her tactical and consultation advice just like you were here on

Apocolypso. She looked into Sorenson's eyes. "Don't sell yourself short, Rolf. You have a brilliant mind, and all you need is a little self-confidence to help push yourself even further."

Rolf took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, ma'am." She took a few steps forward, past the Captain, and then walked over to the other side of the bed. "I'll be ready."

"Good." Amanda pulled out her datapad. "Spartan-458 will be your escort and will stay on the Corvette for the duration of the mission. Godspeed, First Officer Sorenson."

As Captain Greene headed for the bridge, she found herself pushing back a nagging feeling that they were all in way over their heads, that this mission would be the last they ever attempted. It wasn't for lack of a competent crew. Despite not having Hyde aboard, _Apocolypso_ was at peak performance, and she could only assume Galin still ran as tight of a ship as when they were both serving aboard _Nagamo_. It was that tinge of doubt that forced her to be overly cautious in many situations, but taking the initiative when appropriate had been drilled into her ONI officer training since taking possession of her own ship.

And then there's Rolf. She sighed as she started down the last long stretch of corridor to the bridge. The young woman had already seen enough action for one mission, but her ability to find holes in tactics and offer suggestions was priceless and was needed now more than ever. It wasn't that she didn't trust Rolf but her lack of experience. _Though she won't be alone_.

She entered the bridge and quickly noticed that Laszlo Sorvad was not present. She keyed the comm unit on her command chair. "Professor Sorvad? Are you already on _Eye of Karaan_?"

There was a crackle then a distant sound of a foreign tongue swearing. "Yes," Sorvad answered distractedly. "We have all of the translation programs in effect and are just about ready to test the Slipspace drive." He continued his cursing rant under his breath.

Amanda frowned. "Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong, Captain." His sigh sounded like static over the comm. "It's just these blasted seats. They're not fit for a human and they rub you something fierce if you've sat in them for too long."

"Carry on, then," she replied with a grin. Things were falling into place and now they just needed to execute as flawlessly as possible.

Nicole wondered how she would react to seeing Rolf Sorenson again, but it seemed her momentary lapse in control was past. _At least for now_. The petite woman held her blonde hair in place with a loose pony tail that fell on her left shoulder. It only hindered her ability to look older, Nicole thought, but she carried herself with a more rigid posture than the first time she had seen her. If it was from the injury or the fact that she was now a leader on the Corvette team, Nicole didn't know.

"Ready," Rolf said, hoisting a bag onto her shoulders and only cringing slightly. She picked up her datapad off the counter in Hyde's quarters and stepped into the hallway.

Nicole hesitated. The usual protocol was to walk behind a commanding officer, but she wasn't sure if Rolf would interpret that as an uncomfortable choice. _And if I walk in front of her, it would look like she's my prisoner._ Nicole hated drama. Instead, she did neither and walked alongside Rolf towards the docking bay.

They walked in silence for the majority of their trek into the Corvette, but while they headed down the last stretch of corridor to _Eye of Karaan_'s bridge, Rolf finally spoke. "I never did thank you for what you did, saving my life and all."

So, say it then. Nicole grimaced behind her visor and didn't reply. She knew Rolf was looking for some sort of acknowledgement of the deed, but it wasn't anything special to Nicole. She had saved lives before and it didn't do her any benefit to befriend the damsel. It was mostly annoying. Still, there was a tinge of guilt, and Nicole could feel that distant emotion from the previous day reach its decrepit, withered hand from the grave in which she buried it. Her response was a single solitary nod to Rolf.

"Yes, well, thank you, Spartan." She let the last word hang in the air, as if she was fishing for a friendlier term to use.

Nicole just nodded again. She knew the girl was just being polite, but Spartans are ingrained to shut off the outside when necessary. And right now it was necessary. _For _my_ sake_.

Surprisingly, the Corvette didn't feel all that different than before to Nicole. Even with gravity and every system restored, it still felt very uneasy aboard an enemy ship, like some Elite was waiting to pop out and start shooting everyone at any second. But the bridge doors opened silently and the two women walked into a busy scene. Nearly a dozen crewmen were already stationed at consoles, most with their datapads on stands beside them, and Nicole spotted the de-facto Captain talking with Sorvad. The woman looked even taller with her long black hair falling past mid-back, and the tighter uniform she wore left little to the imagination.

Sorvad saw them first and smiled. "Good to see the both of you," he greeted in an unusually chipper mood. "Lieutenantâ€"I mean, _Captain_â€"Jokling and I were just discussing our plan for the first rendezvous."

Jokling gave him a sideways stare. "First Officer Sorenson, if you'd like to be included in the discussion the Professor can fill you in on _his_ plan." Before Sorvad could open his mouth in retort, she added, "while I show the Spartan around for a moment." She flashed a brief smile and motioned for Nicole to join her.

Nicole smirked and nodded once to Sorenson before she began walking with Jokling. Out of the corner of her visor she saw the Professor escort Sorenson to an open terminal and begin his explanation.

When they were just outside of the ring of consoles Jokling sighed. "Once the Professor has something in his head, there's no chance to change his mind," she muttered. "He and Melissa are running the show

pretty much on their own."

Nicole snorted. "What about you, ma'am?"

"Oh, I'm sure once all hell breaks loose they'll ask me to clean up their mess." She led them to the back of the bridge and turned around to look out at the crew. "Our AI Melissa needs to be at the proverbial helm, but I'm still in command of the bridge. This first rendezvous, though . . ." She shook her head. "If Dawning Prospect suspects anything then we're going to have to be lucky enough to catch it with its shields down. I've never been on the giving-end of Covenant weaponry, but I imagine their defenses are much better than the armor plating on our Prowlers."

Nicole nodded. She liked Jokling. Very commanding and very to-the-point. "What's the next step, ma'am?"

She folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the back wall. "We're all prepped and ready, waiting on either captains' blessing. Captain Thorm has already activated and jettisoned an ONI-encrypted beacon stating our intentions, if we don't make it back." She rolled her head to the left then right. "Personally, I give us one in three odds." She glanced over to Nicole. "Any takers?"

Yeah. I like this one.

With the dorsal docking bay doors sealed with both ONI vessels safely aboard, the Corvette Eye of Karaan cleared the orbital plane and fired up its Slipstream drive. The black void appeared before them in a spinning vortex and the ship vanished inside, leaving only the ONI beacon behind them and a waiting Covenant Frigate at their destination.

11. Chapter 11

Author's Note: Please be aware of the recent decision to change the Rating to "M", due to the subject matter discussed in this chapter and most likely the next. Please read responsibly and also know that i might change the direction out of respect to others that have read it up until now with a "T" rating. _
>thanks

* * *

><p>Chapter 11

From Apocolypso's bridge, Captain Greene could see nothing but black on the viewports. Melissa had thoughtfully set up a video stream from the Corvette and matched the view that the Covenant ship was seeing onto the two ONI ships' bridge viewports. It took everything in Amanda not to react when they came out of the Slipstream and order her own ship to start maneuvers. Even though both ONI ships were ready to break away from the Corvette at any sign of a fight, it felt odd to be a spectator for the first leg of their mission.

The AI pedestal beside her command chair flickered and Melissa's yellow avatar appeared. "Should we activate Eye of Karaan's

cloaking system, Captain?"

Frowning, Amanda hit her comm. "Galin, thoughts?"

The other ONI captain came back after a few seconds elapsed. "That may depend on Covenant protocol. Is it common for ships to arrive at a 'green zone' prepared for combat?"

"True," Amanda said. Part of their plan was to use the previous system failures as a reason why they were late to arrive and it could help mask their later use of cloaking, should the need arise. "What if, when Melissa mentions our troubles with the Corvette to the Covenant Frigate, we simulate a systems failure spike? Kind of like proving our point."

That would help make the gambit more believable," Jokling added from the _Eye of Karaan_'s bridge.

"That way if we arrive at the Resource Fleet they won't suspect much if we're cloaked for a portion of our stay," Galin added.

Melissa bowed. "Very well." She looked up and her avatar took a deep breath. "ETA to rendezvous 4 minutes."

Amanda switched her comm to broadcast over _Apocolypso_'s PA only. "We are four minutes out. If we fall under attack, both Prowlers will offer cover while the Corvette retreats to Rally Point Bravo. But with any luck our next stop will be somewhere with plenty of targets to light up." She smiled when she heard a few shouts and grunts of agreement. "Good luck."

* * *

><p>Rolf Sorenson was as focused as she had ever been. Her fingers were poised over her keypad and her eyes were locked on the main viewport, waiting for the last few seconds to countdown to their arrival. When the black void of the Slipstream collapsed, it left only distant stars shining brightly without any residual light emitting from a nearby star.<p>

"Contact, bearing thirty degrees, approximately 78 klicks away," the sensor officer called from his station behind Rolf. "Bringing up the details now."

The central holo-globe wavered a few times before it displayed an image of a less elegantly-design ship. More oblong and less menacing, the readout below the hologram was quickly translated to read: Frigate, _Dawning Prospect_.

"That's our contact," Jokling announced. She keyed her comm. "Galin, Captain Greene, should Melissa begin her dialog now?"

Galin answered. "Wait until they hail you. Remember: 'Angry Shipmaster with no time for others' is what we're going for."

Before Jokling could acknowledge his order, a hiss came over the comm and the frigate's image was replaced by a dark, brooding Sangheili hunched over in his command chair. Rolf tensed for a moment, but then remember that Melissa had disabled the holocams auto-connect feature. He growled something in his native tongue and everyone looked over to

Melissa's glowing avatar, waiting for the translation. The AI displayed the words below the Sangheili's image as well as broadcasted the English translation through the PA. "Do you seek to make me a fool?"

Sorvad, who was now standing next to Jokling squinted. He was the closest person to being a xenolinguist they had aboard, but they agreed to have a consultation with each necessary reply. He had already discussed at length with all three captains about how the conversation should go. "I would respond with a simple 'what?'" He looked over to Melissa. "Angrily, of course."

The AI smiled and complied. The translation was made but only the Sangheili tongue was broadcasted to the frigate, saving the need for the crews of both Prowlers to run a double translation.

The Shipmaster's composure remained the same. "You kept me waiting for days while I am belittled by the Fleetmaster. You will be punished for your delay!" He slammed his fist down on his command chair for emphasis.

Rolf frowned. This wasn't the place for a shipmaster of a smaller vessel to make such bold statements to shipmaster of such a prestigious ship, she was sure of it. "He's bluffing," she said quickly. "Or, I mean, he's just frustrated with our late arrival and wants to take it out on us."

The sensors officer perked up. "The Frigate is closing distance, slowly, but he has not activated any of its weapon systems."

Jokling made a face. "What are the frigate's weapons capabilities?"

"Minimal, at best," Melissa chimed in. "I agree with First Officer Sorenson's assessment."

Sorvad scratched at his beard. "So he's not challenging us." He looked back at Sorenson. "Let's keep this little dance going, then, shall we?" He smiled. "Melissa, answer back with: 'The Fleetmaster's reprimands were well deserving of an insubordinate such as you.'"

Jokling approved with a single nod and Melissa transmitted the response. They all watched the hologram of the Shipmaster and waited for his response. When he didn't move for a handful of seconds, Rolf wondered if the translation program had failed.

"Why are you late," the Shipmaster rumbled simply.

"Activate the false systems error loop," Jokling ordered with a snap of her fingers. The tech complied, and _Eye of Karaan_'s interior lights dimmed for a moment while the viewports seemed to gloss over at the same time. She nodded to Sorvad. "Your turn."

"Right before we were ready to jump here, our systems overloaded and crippled our ship, leaving us stranded up until now." He paused. "Repairs were made, and as you can see, we are still experiencing problems. Even our communications are severely limited." Melissa translated what Sorvad said.

The Shipmaster shook his head. "Is your Slipspace drive still functional? Or will you need me to tow you in?" he said with a slight grin.

Sorvad folded his arms across his chest. "It seems banter is the manner in which they are accustomed." He looked over to Rolf again. "Perhaps there is some past confrontation between the two?"

Rolf's expression soured. "If there is, then I'd respond with a position that you are willing to 'dish it out' while showing him his place below you." She shrugged. "Either way, you need to show him you are superior."

Melissa cleared her proverbial throat. "I suggest we use one of our Shipmaster's personal sayings, if I've read through his dictations accurately. 'By death or by flight, they will know the wrath of the _Eye of Karaan_.'" She frowned. "Actually, I believe that is the unofficial motto of the ship. Shall I translate it?"

Jokling nodded and the Shipmaster's words were sent to the Frigate.

This time the frigate's shipmaster replied with a calmer voice than at first, albeit, under rigid control, but calmer nonetheless. "The hour grows late, and we have already wasted too much time in talk." The Shipmaster looked down, almost sullen. "The Fleetmaster is waiting for the both of us to arrive. The rest of the Fleet is on station at our destination."

Sorvad smiled conspiratorially. "Then I look forward to reporting to the Fleetmaster of our success." Melissa translated.

The Shipmaster perked up. "You have found it? You have discovered a safe zone for our Fleet behind the enemy's lines?"

Jokling walked over to the communications officer. "Have you received the coordinates yet for the Resource Fleet?"

He shook his head. "Not yet, ma'am."

Jokling motioned for Sorvad to continue.

Rolf stood up to interject. "Perhaps suggest working in a mutual partnership of some kind with him. Convince him in that we're on the same side, after all." She glanced down at the mission notes Greene had given her and smiled with the idea rising up in her mind. "If we make him think he's getting some of the glory, he'll help defend us if we arrive at the Resource Fleet under an unresponsive comm system."

"Good call," Sorvad said. "Melissa, answer with this: 'Yes, and together we will bring honor to our Fleet.'"

When the Shipmaster received the transmission he slowly sat up in his command chair. "Yes, Shipmaster." He looked off to his left and barked an order. "The updated coordinates are being sent now. We will delay our departure until you are safely away in slipspace."

Jokling hovered over the comm officer's chair. When his datapad beeped and he gave her a nod, she turned back to Sorvad. "Thank him

and then let's get moving."

Sorvad cleared his throat. "We will test our drive one more time, and then depart. Thank you."

The Shipmaster offered a reverent bow of his head. He spoke something in his native tongue, but the translation did not appear or come over the comm. Jokling stepped towards the holo-globe. "Melissa, what's wrong? What did he say?"

The AI's avatar shook her head. "I'm not sure," she said. "I didn't recognize the annunciation."

The Shipmaster repeated the phrase and raised his head, his face hardening.

"Oh, I think I have it now." Melissa ran the software and the translation came out: "May our ancestors guide you into the glory of that which you deserve." She gave a flat smile and nodded. "He was using a variation of a dialect seldom used by higher-ranking Sangheili."

"Like an accent," Sorvad suggested.

Rolf could almost feel the Shipmaster's eyes begin to question and she cleared her throat loudly. "He's expecting a response."

Jokling frowned. "What should you response _with_?" she asked Sorvad. "The same thing?"

Sorvad shrugged. "Perhaps just a simple, 'thank you' again?"

Leaving her station, Rolf joined the Professor and the Captain. "No, this is wrong—something's wrong. He wants a certain response from us. I ran the phrase through the archives and our Shipmaster has never used it." She swallowed. "It could be an old-fashioned farewell that demands the other half be given by the recipient."

". . . Of that which you deserve." The Shipmaster repeated it once more, this time rising up out of his chair. "What do you not understand? It is a simple statement!"

Rolf swore under her breath. "Can we simulate an entire comms failure? Something to buy us more time?"

"Wait!" Melissa turned away and she responded to the Shipmaster's words with several of her own. "And may your children's children see the bounty of the harvest." She looked back at Sorvad, Jokling, and Rolf apologetically. "It was an old saying I was able to grab from his archived personal logs. Something like a responsive 'blessing' heads of keeps would use with one another." She looked apologetically at Rolf. "It was under one of his corrupted files. Not your fault for not finding it."

But the Shipmaster didn't back down. "Why do you take so long to answer something that should be second nature to a Sangheili in such a high position?" He stepped forward, his head enlarging in the view. "And why have you not shown your face? What are you hiding?"

Ignoring Melissa's jibe, Rolf's mind raced. The simple way to deal with this would be to enter the coordinates they just received and make for the Resource Fleet, leaving the Frigate behind. However, since the Shipmaster had obviously contacted the Fleetmaster prior to their arrival, he could just alert him of the _Eye of Karaan_'s possible deception. Which left them two options: they blow the Frigate up, or salvage this comm exchange.

Jokling was already on it. "Weapons, I want a full salvo ready on my command. If we have to bring this idiot down to keep ourselves secret then I'll do it." She glanced over at Sorvad. "That's if, Professor, you can't talk our way out of this very, very soon."

Sorvad raised his chin, as if he was accepting the challenge from an old friend. "Melissa, tell him 'do I have to explain our communications are faltering as well? Or have you made enough assumptions for today?'" He nodded, satisfied with his words. He then held up his hand to add more commentary. "If you seek to dishonor yourself further by questioning a Shipmaster entrusted with the location to covertly attack the enemy, then by all means continue your tirade."

The entire bridge crew held its collective breath as Melissa translated. The holo-image of the Shipmaster standing seemed to be stuck in a loop until he growled something unintelligible and switched off the communication. The holo-globe changed back to an overview of _Dawning Prospect_.

The sensors officer raised his head. "The Frigate is holding station awaiting our slipspace jump."

Jokling placed a hand on Sorvad's shoulder. "Nice work, Professor." She keyed her comm. "Galin, Greene, we are good to go."

"Have Melissa verify the coordinates and then get us moving, Captain Jokling," Thorm said. "And excellent work, _Eye of Karaan_," he added.

"Thank you," Jokling replied.

Melissa's image flickered briefly before she responded. "Coordinates are locked in and our ETA is approximately 14 hours."

Jokling started for the oversized command chair and Melissa gave her an abbreviated bow. "Melissa, Navigation, let's go."

As Rolf exhaled, many of the crew cheered and clapped, expressing their relief at a tense moment. It was a huge gamble but their trickery had paid off. Mostly due to Melissa and Sorvad, but Rolf couldn't help but feel a bit of pride swell up in her, giving her a rush that was seldom experienced.

Eye of Karaan activated its slipspace drive and entered the black void, destined for the most perilous mission any of the ONI personnel had ever experienced.

* * *

><p>Nicole wanted to relax, to push out a few breaths of relief, but her training kept her on alert well after the Corvette had entered

the Slipstream. Still standing just outside the rear of the ring of consoles, the bridge crew began to file out, most likely looking to get a solid block of sleep in before their arrival.<p>

Captain Jokling walked up to Nicole and offered a lopsided grin. "I'm not surprised you stuck around for all the drama. Probably hoping something would have gone wrong, am I right?" She paused, leaving enough of a break to allow Nicole to reply and accepting her silence as an acknowledgement. Jokling shifted her weight to her left side and folded her arms across her chest. "Greene and Thorm will hold a briefing in 10 hours aboard Apocolypso to discuss our battle options. Your presence has been requested, but you can grab some shut-eye while you can."

Nicole simply nodded.

Jokling opened her mouth as if to say something more but closed it. She returned the nod and started for the exit.

After she left, there were only a handful of crewmembers, most likely staying behind in case something catastrophic happened while in the Slipstream, but Nicole noticed Rolf Sorenson still at her station. She appeared to be sneaking glances over her shoulder to see who all was left. When she finally turned her head and shoulders around and saw Nicole, she stood and walked over.

Nicole braced herself for an onslaught of conversation, and just to be safe, she reminded herself not to get emotionally tangled up in whatever Rolf wanted. Maybe if I start the dialog I can help keep it on an easier course. "You did well with your analysis."

"Thanks." The shorter woman blinked. "You were watching us the whole time?"

Nicole shrugged. "I have to be ready at a moment's notice, and things almost did boil over into something resembling an all out assault on a Covenant Frigate."

Rolf looked down, almost abashed. "Yes, well, things worked out." She checked her wrist chrono absently. "Are you staying aboard the Corvette?"

Aren't we all, in manner of speaking? Nicole could feel her loosing hold of the conversation already. "I'm currently stationed here, yes, but the Corvette doesn't have the armory necessary for my MJOLNIR so I'll have to return to the Apocolypso later." She wanted to suck the words right back into her mouth, but giving Rolf her future whereabouts seemed like an unconscious thing to do. Even if it went against her better judgment.

Rolf smiled in understanding. "Well, I'm sure we'll all need our rest before a long day tomorrow." Her smile subsided and she walked away.

Nicole frowned to herself. She was expecting Rolf to be an annoyance she wanted rid of, but part of her felt guilty for judging the poor girl. It wasn't really her place to judge someone acting their age, even though Rolf was probably just a few years older, but Spartans were a different breed. They had kinship only to themselves and felt out of place when they were forced into long-winded conversations

with officers of any type.

But Rolf was someone different. She was a young woman looking to use her skills and just be accepted for what she could do. Nicole was someone that wanted to show everyone how useful she could be, if given the chance. She didn't know how much good she could do when they arrived at the massing Resource Fleet, but she was hoping to prove to her superiors and to her fellow Spartans that she was capable of more than just 'Marine babysitting. '

Without a second thought, she marched out of the bridge and down the long corridor to where both Prowlers were parked. She hesitated, though, when she started up _Apocolypso_'s ramp. Even though she had planned on sleeping either out of her armor on _Apocolypso_ or in her armor on the Corvette, she knew she couldn't sleep. Not yet. Her mind was racing with those distant thoughts again and she needed something to help calm her.

The deck officer saluted to her, but she spun around and started for _Nagamo_'s ramp. She didn't know what Rolf would think if she found out she hadn't stayed where she said she would, but it didn't matter that much to Nicole. She needed to blow off some energy.

Already familiar with _Nagamo_'s layout, she had removed her armor and was back in the makeshift gym without finding anyone there. She wasn't sure if crewmembers aboard the Prowler even tried to keep in shape or if working out during a heightened threat level was against regulations. Either way, she enjoyed the solace and started her warm-up.

As she worked herself up into using the workout dummies, Nicole let her mind begin to process the past few days' events. Her fight against the Covenant troops, while appearing to be a bit short, felt challenging enough for her not wish for a sooner confrontation with the Elites, but it did make her wonder if people understood how difficult it was. Even with all of her training and armor and weapons and enhancements, she was still a teenager.

Nicole settled back in a crouch, waiting for the workout dummy to return to its original shape before repeating her 1-2 combo. She nearly laughed to herself. Underneath her armor and behind her visor, people didn't think of her as a teenager, they thought of her only as a supersoldier. A Spartan. An asset. _Expendable?_ She delivered the closed-fisted barrage and the dummy's face pitted with the impacts. Thoughts of Operation: TORPEDO surfaced and she wondered if she was headed for the same fateâ€"only this time she would be the Spartan. She sighed deeply. _In the end, does it matter? I have a task that needs to be done and I do it. Simple duty._

She wiped her brow with the sleeve of her shirt and walked over to the edge of the mat for her water bottle. _Simple duty_, she repeated to herself. If there was ever a reminder as to why she needed to carry out this order or that, it was duty. She knew it sounded cold and calloused, but it was something she had convinced herself of since the first round of Spartan training.

Something inside her cringed, though, and she tried to trace the reaction to a solidified thought. _Belonging_. Nicole felt her heart ache for a few beats. Something that had always been a part of Spartan-life was a sense of community within their ranksâ€"family.

Teams formed naturally and assignments reflected those bonds. Sure, she was one of the runts of the litter, and there were others that tended to be loners. She wondered how they coped with feeling like an outsider in a group as exclusive as the Spartan IIs.

She took a few gulps of her water and tried to push herself through a few more rounds with her routine. When she returned her bottle to the floor, she caught movement from a reflection in the large mirror that covered half of the starboard wall. Nicole looked up to see a single figure standing in the doorway of the gym.

It was Rolf. "Sorry, I didn't think anyone else would be here," she said. Rolf paused and then squinted. "Oh, it's you. I thought you were aboard the Apocolypso?"

Nicole shrugged. "I changed my mind." As Rolf entered, almost reluctantly, Nicole could see the weariness in her eyes. She looked very tired. "Shouldn't you be in your cabin, getting some sleep?"

She snorted and threw her towel on the rack next to a resistance bike. "Shouldn't you be doing the same?" Rolf activated the equipment and started at a leisurely pace. "I can't sleep and this usual helps bring the nerves down."

"You're nervous?" Nicole asked, wanted to help distract herself by resuming her pummeling of the workout dummy but knowing talk was almost a requirement at this point.

"Aren't you?" Rolf asked in the same tone. "We're about to attempt one of the most risky missions ONI has ever tried. Though most of the crew isn't saying anything, I think our odds of survival are fairly low."

"One in three." Nicole was about to take another swing at the dummy, but she stopped herself and turned to face Rolf. "Are you afraid of dying?"

Rolf switched her bike up to the next speed. "No," she said slowly, "but there are a lot of good people on board these ships."

"Good people die every day," Nicole blurted out, thinking of all those Spartans that had died only weeks before. "And it's something we all agreed to when we signed up."

"Except for you," Rolf said quietly.

For a moment, the only sound in the gym was the whooshing of the bike's servos and the heavy breaths both women were taking. Nicole didn't know what to say. Spartans were trained since a young age, and it was the only life Nicole had known. Instruction, conduct, even a raw moral compass had been trained into their minds and actions. Rolf's comment hit her in a spot that demanded her to react with her true feelings. Feelings. Emotions. Things foreign to a Spartan. Or so she thought.

"I'm sorry, that sounded a bit calloused," Rolf apologized. "But we all have to look at our missions in general as something worthy of our attention. We have to have a reason to fight, and if for nothing else, for the call of duty."

The hairs on Nicole's neck shot straight up. Duty. The word seemed to be void of all meaning then and there. In this war against the Covenant "duty" had sent countless men and women to their death. "Duty" had no drive, no push to keep her going. Part of her was torn over the word, as if that emotional side of her was creeping back into view, seeking to add a layer of clarity over her eyes.

"No," Nicole said. "It's not enough. We need something other than 'duty' to keep us going."

Rolf stopped her machine and dabbed the sweat from her face. "Then what is it for you?"

With her vulnerability down, Nicole couldn't stop herself. "I need to show them how useful I can be. I'm tired of being considered a second-rate Spartan. Sure, nobody ever calls me that, but I can read the text on the datapad with the assignments they give me."

"How's that?" Rolf asked, getting up from her bike and standing next to it.

"They never trust me with the big stuff, you know? Like the major offensives and battles are reserved for Red Team or entire squads of Spartans." Nicole could feel the dam of emotion well up and she couldn't hold back any longer. Tears formed around the edges of her eyes and she turned away, embarrassed. "They don't trust me," she whispered.

What the hell is going on? Nicole tried to calm herself by making fists, but she couldn't force them open and she struck a nearby dummy with jarring force, knocking it over completely. She was having a breakdown, one that Halsey and some of the medtechs had warned her against and tried to detect before. But it was useless and she cried out in frustration, dropping to her knees.

Rolf was at her side in an instant but Nicole shoved Rolf's hands from her shoulders. She meant to simply shrug her off, but instead Rolf was pitched to the ground, landing on her back. Rolf quickly got up and scurried to the door.

"Go, leave. Report me to Captain Thorm and he'll have me put in restraints under sedation," Nicole bit out. She fell back on her rear and buried her head in her hands.

"No." Rolf calmly locked the gym doors and walked over with a fresh towel. As she handed it to Nicole she sat down opposite to her, face to face. "You need this release. No one can understand what it's like to be in that armor all the time—"what you've seen, what kind of weight is placed upon your shoulders." She leaned in. "You don't have to prove your . . . self." She trailed off and raised a hand to her mouth.

Nicole wiped her face, a mixer of tears and sweat, and looked up into Rolf's lightly-freckled face. There was a sense of recognition there, as if she was speaking to and for the both of them. "Neither do you," she said, her voice back under control. "You feel the same way, don't you?"

Rolf sighed, looking away. "Though I think people like Captain Greene

put _too_ much trust in me. I mean, I'm serving about the Corvette as a First Officer. That's a lot of responsibility." She let out a chuckle. "And here we are, still teenagers."

"What?" Nicole asked. "How old are you?"

"18." Rolf looked down distractedly. "I graduated early and enrolled in officer training earlier last year. I'm an only child and my parents died on Harvest, so there's been nothing else holding me back from serving the UNSC," she said with a faint smile. Her expression shifted to one of stern rebuke. "But you have nothing to be ashamed of. If you don't think this mission isn't critical enough, then I don't know what would sway you to believe this is a battle worth fighting."

"I'm notâ€"

"And if you don't have anything else in this galaxy to fight for, then maybe you should try and find something. Your family?"

Nicole tensed. "Unknown."

"Your fellow Spartans."

"Like I contribute anything with them."

"Stop selling yourself short," Rolf reprimanded. Her blue eyes blinked several times. "What about your crewmembers?"

Nicole felt that burning sensation carve out a spot in her stomach and lance right up to her throat. That same sensation she felt when she had seen Rolf lying in the medical bay. Only this time, there wasn't any confusion. It seemed to bring clarity to her mind, as if accepting it rather than rejecting it was the key to clearing her head once and for all.

All along, she had only wanted acceptance, and Rolf had made a connection with her that was binding, revealing, and vulnerable. A new emotion rose up inside. Confidence.

Rolf could see Nicole's shift in her disposition. The blonde woman had her lips parted, and her breathing was picking up again. Their feelings were mutual and the tension mounted. Both women had finally share more intimate details about themselves with someone else that not only had the same issues but could also accept them.

Nicole didn't have to hold back any longer. It felt natural; it felt right.

Rolf leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper. "What about me?"

Her heart was pounding in her chest, and Nicole didn't know what to do. This was the first time she had ever allowed herself to entertain thoughts of loveâ€"or lust, let alone any type of deep emotion. Part of her wanted to slow down and process, while her other half was bubbling with excitement. _Screw it_.

Nicole leaned in, softly pursed her lips, and closed her eyes, hoping that Rolf would compensate for her lack of experience.

She wasn't let down. Rolf gracefully tilted her head and encased Nicole's upper lip in hers. Rolf's hand came up and held on to Nicole's neck and they kissed again. Nicole felt heat rush to her lower abdomen and out through her entire body. She slowly brought her hands up clutched Rolf's shoulders. They kissed once more before unlocking their lips, and they rested their foreheads against each other.

Rolf breathed heavily and mouthed words that didn't quite come out.

Nicole wanted to say something, but nothing came out either. She only focused on breathing.

"Are you okay with this?" Rolf finally asked, her breath beating against Nicole's face. "I'm sorry if Iâ€"

"No, it's okay." Nicole rested back on her haunches. "Maybe this is happening too fast."

"I think that may be the point," Rolf said. "Don't think, just act." She leaned in, resting her hands on Nicole's thighs.

"But not here," Nicole interrupted. It did feel a bit reactionary, the entire thing, but she couldn't tell if she needed this or not. There was a lot to process for what had just happened, and the ramifications of furthering whatever "this" was could spell disaster for both of their careers. It could sideline her even more.

And that's what scared her. The progress she had made in the past few moments, about how to actually feel something for another human being with emotions she had set aside for so long, could just as easily reset her life in a negative way. But I want this. Now. She took a deep breath, hoping it would evaporate some of the fog clouding her mind, but her dormant hormones took on new life and raged inside.

Nicole knew it was highly unlikely, given her augmentation, but somehow she wanted to go down the path of reckless abandon. Her mind was giving pause, but her emotions were screaming for acceptance, love, compassion, and even lust.

Rolf, her voice seductive, whispered. "We can go to my cabin. It's secure and private."

Nicole could have sworn it felt like she was floating, hastily making her way down empty corridors and entering Rolf's quarters. The sound of her duffle bag falling to the floor made her turn and see Rolf closing the door behind her, tossing their belongings in the entryway. It was a deadening sound, like the beginning quotation mark of a long, drawn-out paragraph that waited to tell the details of their night together.

Nicole began to tremble.

12. Chapter 12

****Adult Subject Matter Alert!****

Chapter 12

Rolf moved past Nicole, gently brushing up against her arm, and began to remove her clothes. It wasn't sensual or methodical, but Rolf kept moving towards the private bathroom with each article she removed. When she was down to just her undergarments, she slowly turned around. "Shall we wash up first?"

Nicole could barely hear the words; her heart was beating so loud now. She just stood there, immovable like an ancient monolith.

Rolf flipped on the glowpanels in the bathroom and disappeared inside. She tossed her remaining clothes out into the main room and turned on the water to the shower. When Nicole didn't follow, she poked her head out the doorway and smiled. "You coming?"

Nicole took a deep breath but didn't say anything. She couldn't say anything. Her mind was racing again with thoughts of every kind. Even flashbacks to moments during the augmentation process, previous battles she had been in, where she was when she had heard the outcome of Operation: TORPEDO, they were all running through her mind's eye. It seemed as if her hormones had stoked every fire of every memory, good or bad, just to see how her body would react.

Rolf let out a short, quiet laugh and stepped into the room, her naked body silhouetted by the bathroom glowpanels. Again, she didn't try to be seductiveâ€”not yet, but her motion was that of beckoning a friend to come play. She crossed the distance to Nicole and took her hand in hers.

Shuddering at first but not resisting her touch, Nicole allowed Rolf to lead her to the bathroom. They made it to the doorway before Rolf turned and raised her eyebrows expectantly. Nicole looked Rolf over from head to toe, feeling heat rush inside as her gaze paused on certain areas only to be drawn to others. Then she noticed how she was still in her workout clothes and she smiled out of embarrassment.

Nicole felt it almost necessaryâ€”requiredâ€”to even the dresscode by removing her own garments, as if being clothed was against current regulations. She unzipped her top, which Rolf took from her and tossed behind her nonchalantly. She scooted her shorts down past her thighs and kicked them away.

Rolf then stepped back, looking up and down, as if to finally see the Spartan in a new, inviting light. Her eyes took on an intensity that almost appeared primal. She licked her lips and wrapped her arms around her own torso only to extend them out seconds later. She reached around Nicole and pressed her body against hers. With her fingers she unhooked Nicole's sports bra and pulled her closer.

Nicole's heart was sure to come out of her chest, and she struggled to not buckle at the knees. Being shorter, Rolf's head fit underneath Nicole's chin as the petite woman kissed her breastbone. Rolf pulled away with Nicole's bra, but Nicole still felt a pit of uneasiness and she covered her chest awkwardly with her arms.

"It's okay," Rolf soothed, her voice barely above a whisper. She

raised her head and stood on her toes to kiss Nicole.

But the Spartan didn't kiss back. Rolf's lips felt moist on her own, but Nicole couldn't break free from her paralysis. Even as Rolf's kisses fell more frequently and began to trace down her neck, Nicole was immovable. Goosebumps radiated from her dark skin and she shuddered almost uncontrollably.

Rolf's left hand came up and cupped Nicole's right breast, while her right hand pressed against Nicole's stomach and ventured below. As the petite blonde woman ran her left hand underneath Nicole's arms, her right hand rubbed the outside of the Spartan's underwear.

"Wait," Nicole managed to squeak out. Something wasn't right. Something felt incredibly wrong. Suddenly the moment didn't feel mutual at all and she desperately wanted to abandon the scene. The heat exuding from under Rolf's hand rushed upward into Nicole's head and she grabbed Rolf's wrists to forestall any further entanglements. "Wait," she said again, more forcefully.

"Am I going too fast?" Rolf asked with a wry grin. It was an uncomfortable expression.

"I don't think I should be here." Nicole let go of Rolf and stepped back, covering up her chest. "This is . . ."

"What?" Rolf asked, placing her hands on her hips, giving Nicole a full view of her nude body. Shapely legs complimented her flat stomach and swelling chest as Rolf undid her hair to let blonde locks fall playfully onto her shoulders. Her tone had shifted to "slightly annoyed" now, but her stance was still inviting. "We both want this, don't we?"

Nicole swallowed. "I don't think I do. Not now." She bent down and found her top, hastily throwing it on while turning her back towards Rolf. Part of her wanted to say "sorry" but it would have been more like a courtesy than how she truly felt. "I have to go."

"You don't have to," Rolf said, her voice coming from right behind Nicole. Rolf's hands wrapped around Nicole's midsection like a child to a mother. Her tone of voice was now shifting to near-begging. "Please, stay."

Nicole didn't know if Rolf was just trying to be manipulative or what, but she needed to leave. Now. "Stop it," she hissed, untangling herself from Rolf's embrace. She found her shorts and put them back on. "I have to go," she repeated.

"Fine," Rolf said with a tinge of frustration, plopping down on the bed. She sat leaning back, her elbows propping her up and her legs folding over one another. "I just thought we both needed something that we could give each other."

Rolf's words were like poisoned honey, luring her back to the hive that could only scar her even more deeply. Nicole didn't look at her, didn't even say goodbye. Nicole grabbed her sports bra and shoes, threw them in her duffle bag, and stormed out of the room and into the vacant corridor. She hastily made for the lift, trying her best not to appear to be in a hurry but being so all the more.

Once inside she keyed for her previous room's deck and fished inside her duffle bag for her jumper. She put it on quickly, tearing a hole in the armpit, and ran a hand through her sweat-soaked hair. Nicole took a deep breath and let it out rapidly. Frustration brewed in her mind and she clenched her fists. _How could I let myself go that far? What the hell was wrong with me?_ _is_ wrong with me?_ She tried her best not to yell out in anger but couldn't help it and she screamed in the confines of the lift and its silent shaft.

The lift doors parted and she bolted to her cabin, still containing Spartan amenities. She undressed and got in the shower, setting the temperature lukewarm. The saltiness of her sweat ran down her face and she could taste it. She spit it out. Nicole grabbed the shampoo and washed her hair vigorously, and after she finished rinsing it out she pressed her back against the far wall of the shower and sunk down to her rear, letting her legs fold underneath her.

Gone was her lustful desire, and with its departure a clarity was brought to her thoughts. _True_ clarity, not the emotional, fake lucidity from before that led her into Rolf's cabin. She knew she had screwed up. She knew falling into temptation the way she had was something regular teens went through. But Nicole was a Spartan. Bred for war, trained by the best, and utilized in the most surgical ways.

So why don't I feel like one? It was a question that held its own answer. _"Emotions will betray you every time,"_ one of her instructors had said. Whether or not she felt like one thing or another, she was who she was. Social life and relationships outside of the Program were never meant for her. It was a cold, hard fact that Nicole needed to remind herself of. Disregarding her training and augmentations disconnected her from being who she truly was. Giving in to her libido or lustful desires was a quick way out of the rank and file, even if the occurrence was rare amount Spartan IIs.

But it did happen. Nicole had let herself slip into the moment. Hormones firing or not, it was something that should not have happened. Denying herself wasn't a new concept but it did take years of practice to perfect.

Nicole raised her head and let the water hit her face. Part of her wanted to entertain the idea that Halsey and the rest of her crew knew about this hormonal ticking time bomb in Nicole and had purposely brushed her aside in hopes it wouldn't go off during a vital mission. _Or maybe Halsey was protecting me all along by keeping me isolated long enough for me to figure this out and push through it?_

She sighed and slowly got up, reaching out to turn the water temperature hotter. As she continued to shower Nicole realized she wanted to speak with the doctor about her episode. Honesty would win her trust. And if she could carry out her current mission without mishap, it would prove that she can still fight as a Spartan, regardless of her hormonal hiccup.

Nicole shut off the water and nodded to herself. That was what she had to do. Carry out her duty. She stepped out of the shower and dried herself off. _But I need to talk to Rolf and let her know where

I stand._ What happened did happen, but it doesn't mean they couldn't work professionally as they should.

She threw on a robe and collapsed into her bed, falling asleep almost instantly.

* * *

><p>Rolf rolled over onto her back on the bed, breathing a sigh of frustration. I went too far. I should have read her better. She thought the feelings between her and Nicole were mutual, but obviously they were not. The Spartan had practically bolted out of her cabin in a panic, leaving Rolf alone and still longing for a release of some kind. At her age and in her current disposition her sex-drive would rage in peaks during these long periods or not having any shore leave. At times, if she couldn't find an outlet for pleasure, she was sure she would internally combust.

She knew she was in trouble. If Nicole said anything to Captain Greene it would be the end of Rolf's career, she was certain. But something inside told her she didn't have to worry. They had both stepped into a land of passion and just as quickly left it before nothing major had ensued. And it was just as likely that Nicole feared for her own career, should Rolf bring up the incident. It seemed they both needed each other's silence.

A conversation would have to take place and hopefully they both could remain on-mission until they parted ways. It wasn't an easy thing, talking about "last night" scenarios, but Rolf had done it before. She smiled to herself when she recalled the night her and a female marine back on Crystal hooked up after a night club encounter. It was passion manifested but they both agreed never to mention it to anyone. _It was a night to remember, though_.

Rolf got up and headed for the shower. She didn't need to wash any shame off of herâ€"she felt none, but she did need to clean up before getting some sleep for a long day tomorrow. When she turned on the water and let it cascade down her back, her thoughts drifted back to that cute female marine she had met only months prior. Rolf closed her eyes and let her hands finish the work she had hoped Nicole would have completed moments before. It was all she could do to sleep soundly.

* * *

><p>After only four hours of sleep but still feeling refreshed, Nicole got dressed and headed down to Nagamo's galley. It was mostly filled with the bridge crew from _Eye of Karaan_, and she spotted Professor Sorvad sitting in the same spot as before. Conviction swelled up inside and Nicole knew she had to talk with the older man. She first grabbed a tray full of various breakfast foods and took a seat opposite the Professor. He was looking over several datapads at a time while sipping on his coffee. His tray was empty.

"You know, I've been thinking about what you said to me the last time we talked," Nicole began. "About how I was a Spartan and nothing more."

Laszlo Sorvad looked up, wearing an expression paused with the

tell-tale sign of mild rebuke. "Yes?"

"Well, I know now that that's what I needed to hear." Nicole swallowed. "So, thank you."

The Professor smiled slowly. "At the time, yes." He took another sip of coffee and set his mug down gently. "Just as I am a professor right here, right now." He waved at the collection of datapads before him. "Being able to set aside the menial, the redundant, the distractions, and thoughts that could lead me away from what needs to be done here and now, well, those are dangerous things to think about."

He reached in his pocket and placed on the table a small, metallic medallion bearing a star with a cross behind it framed by ornate gold leafs arranged in a circle. It looked like a merit badge of some sort. "But we cannot forget why we do the things we do, why we seek to end this war and get on with our lives." He nodded to the medallion. "My daughter, Sāra, gave me this the last time I was home. It was a badge she had won after completing her fifth-tier Jujo-Dea championship fight. It is a keepsake that keeps me focused."

Nicole fingered the badge, already worn from Sorvad's cherishment. "She's a fighter."

"Like you." The Professor retrieved the medallion and pocketed it. His smile relaxed. "Knowing who you are can keep you focused as well. It does not mean you are nothing outside an engagement zone, but if you let those rogue thoughts creep in during battle . . . "

"I know," Nicole said with a nod. "I'm finding that to be true now more than ever." She gave a slight frown. "But I am more."

Sorvad's smile returned. "Of course you are, Nicole."

She felt pride rise up inside. It wasn't just the Professor's approval and use of her name that caused her to beam, but it was the fact that he had helped her come to the realization of focusing on the task at hand and setting aside things like her hormonal impulses, lack of experience, or even her age. It was a refreshing feeling, to know that she didn't have to process everything at once like an AI, and that her worries could be worked out after the mission.

It wasn't really Rolf's fault for drudging up Nicole's sexual tendencies. It was a hormonal imbalance that needed correcting, especially for a Spartan. She was sure it would get better with age, just the same with her need to prove herself to her fellow Spartans. Nicole felt a wash of relief and she smiled.

"Thank you, Professor," she said, while peeling open one of her selected fruits.

"You can call me Laszlo," he replied. Sorvad turned his attention back to his datapads and left her alone for the duration of her meal.

She decided to leave him to his work and got up without saying goodbye. She disposed of her trash and started for Rolf's cabin. She

didn't feel at all nervous, even when she knocked on Rolf's door.

The door slid open and Rolf stood in her uniform looking a bit haggard. "Figured it was you," she said soberly. She opened her mouth to say more, but Nicole barged in and the door shut behind her.

"Look, last night was a mistake and as far as I am concerned, we never talk about it, ever." Nicole's words came out all in a rush. "I don't need something like this hanging over my head, and I'm sure you don't either. So let's just call it over and done with. Okay?"

Rolf's eyebrows rose. "Sure. Yeah, that's what I was thinking too," she added, not sounding fully convinced.

Nicole frowned. "I don't blame you, nor do I thank you, but I did find out more about myself through last night's events. This is just something I need to learn from and move on."

"Sounds good." Rolf nodded and sat down on her bed to tie her boots. "For whatever it is worth, I am sorry."

The blonde woman's pose seemed a bit awkward, but Nicole knew she meant what she said. "I'm sorry too." She walked out of the room and started for her cabin to go suit up. It would be a long day and it had started out with more momentum than she had thought possible.

It was going to be difficult to forget all that she had went through last night, but it didn't mean it had to scar her for life. She took it for what it was: a learning experience. Nicole began to smile as she entered her cabin. _Yes, it's something to grow from_. Confidence swelled inside of her and she felt pretty damn good for once.

* * *

><p>"Dismissed and good luck." Captain Amanda Greene leaned back in her seat at the head of the conference table and sighed. As the rest of the people filed out of the room, Melissa's avatar moved from the center of the table to the pedestal next to her. The proximity was meant to convey privacy, but Amanda still waited for the room to completely clear before standing up herself and pace around the table.<p>

"Only a few objections and corrections to the original plan," Melissa said gravely.

Amanda snorted. "There wasn't a whole lot to fix. So much of this mission is based upon us remaining hidden and if we are discovered prematurely then there's not much else to discuss. We scuttle the Corvette and fall back to Rally Point Alpha."

"Still, do you think we are taking too big of a risk?"

The Captain turned to face the AI, thrown off a bit by her question. "Any engagement with the enemy involves risk; just don't start computing the odds, Melissa."

"I already have," she answered with a smirk, her tone back to its

usual cadence. "But I won't entertain you with the projected losses should the battle sway to either side."

Amanda rubbed a hand over her face and gathered up her datapad. "We have little choice in the matter." She started for the door. "Either we stop this back-door invasion here and now, or we risk losing this war before we even make it back to UNSC-controlled space."

13. Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Eye of Karaan exited out of the black void of the Slipstream prematurely from the actual rendezvous point with the Resource Fleet. It had been planned, but the sudden reemergence still made half of the Corvette's bridge crew jump unexpectedly. Kandis Jokling sat in the command chair, which had been ergonomically reupholstered for her, and felt a wave of anxiousness wash over her. "Report."

"All systems are normal," Melissa's fragment answered. "We came out of Slipspace within 95 kilometers of our projected plot. Cloaking systems are holding and we are ready to release our cargo."

A brief smile tugged at the corner of Kandis' mouth. Their "cargo" was the two ONI Prowlers waiting in the docking bay. "Sensors? Are we clear?"

The male officer nodded. "Aye, ma'am. If the Covenant has anything that can detect us way out here, then I'll be impressed."

"Don't need the commentary, Lieutenant," she lightly chided back. "Communications, jettison the comm buoy."

The first portion of this mission involved separating the Corvette from the Prowlers, but Melissa couldn't guarantee that they could do so without being detected even while the Corvette was cloaked. The plan was to drop out of the Slipstream prematurely and separate, sending a comm buoy on ahead to listen in on the waiting Covenant ships. Not willing to risk being detected, Greene and Thorm had suggested piloting the cloaked Prowlers towards the rendezvous from their drop-off point and the Corvette would reenter slipspace only to do a micro-jump to its previously plotted point.

What made this early portion of the mission so dangerous was the lack of communication the three ships would have. They each had their parameters and tasks, but the only information they could receive would be from the Covenant comm traffic from the buoy and their own sensors. It was too much of a risk to attempt transmissions of any kind.

Kandis keyed her comm. "Captains, you are clear for launch." She nodded to Melissa's fragment. The deck shuddered as the enormous docking bay doors retracted. Kandis watched on the main display to see a fisheye view of the hazy outlines of the two Prowlers lifting off, both already cloaked. "Melissa, are weâ€"

"Still cloaked? Yes," the AI fragment answered.

The central holo-globe changed its view to that of an exterior one,

depicting the faintest outline of the Prowlers clearing the Corvette and setting their own courses ahead. The docking bay doors closed with a muffled thump and Kandis settled back in her seat. "Good luck," she whispered, knowing Greene and Galin couldn't hear her. "Comms, what the status of the buoy?"

"Almost within range, ma'am." The Lieutenant looked down and tapped on his keypad. "I'll pipe through anything we get."

Minutes passed, and Melissa's avatar wavered on the makeshift pedestal that had been installed next to the command chair. "Shouldn't we be entering slipspace?"

"Not yet. We need to give our Prowlers as much time as possible to get into position."

"Without raising suspicion," Melissa qualified. "Captain Thorm was very clear on this."

Kandis growled to herself and tried to ignore the burning glare Melissa was giving her. "Dial in our jump coordinates, but wait until I give the command."

"Comm Buoy has detected a Slipstream opening!" the comm officer blurted out. The main holo-display lit up with a magnified view of the event. The frigate Dawning Prospect emerged from the black void and immediately set a course down angle twenty degrees.

"Our escort has finally arrived."

Kandis glanced over at the AI and frowned. "I figured it would take a little more time for it to get here."

"Covenant slipspace drives are more consistent across the board," Melissa said.

"Well, let's listen in and see what they say when we don't show up on time."

They didn't have to wait long. The comm traffic from the Resource Fleet that was now just starting to show on their long-range sensors was beginning to light up the bandwidth. Melissa helped translate.

"Dawning Prospect_, where is Eye of Karaan_?" _

"_My apologies, your Excellency. They should have been here by now. They had experienced system failures before they rendezvoused with us in the Lychan System."_

Kandis' eyes grew wide. "Melissa, can you confirm the first voice's species?"

"Definitely San'Shyuum." The AI's avatar perked up. "They must have a Prophet on board, or at least a Minister of some kind."

A new, gruff voice came over the Covenant chatter. "_This is your fault, Shipmaster_," came the Sangheili voice. "_And you will be held responsible for the loss of one of our Corvettes_."

"_Perhaps they are just delayed_" _Dawning Prospect_'s Shipmaster pleaded. Even through the translation, Kandis could tell the voice was wavering in nervousness.

The senior Sangheili grunted something before lowering his voice. "_The Minister of Conversion has run out of patience. All other Corvettes have reported in and we still have no reasonable coordinates to pursue_" He lowered his voice to a whisper, and Kandis could tell Melissa had a difficult time translating it. "_If my honor is tainted by your lack of competence, then I will see you piloting shuttlecraft for the rest of your days_"

"_Wait, no!_" The Shipmaster exclaimed. "Eye of Karaan _has reported to me that their mission was successful._ _They have found a safe zone for the Fleet!_"

There was a pause in the conversation and Kandis looked over to Professor Sorvad sitting at a console, listening in on the transmissions. His expression was that of pure concentration. "Professor?"

He didn't even look over and just shook his head minutely. "This 'Minister of Conversion', do we have anything on him? I'm not current in my Covenant Hierarchy studies."

From her station, Rolf Sorenson raised her head. "According to our latest reports, the Ministry of Conversion was a branch of the Covenant that dealt with bringing other species into their fold, so to speak." She frowned. "Which doesn't make a whole lot of sense for an invasion fleet."

"Maybe the translation is off," Sorvad suggested.

"Regardless," Kandis interjected, "they are here, they are the enemy, and we are carrying out our mission parameters." She nodded to Melissa. "I think we've given them as much time as possible. Let's make our grand appearance." Kandis swallowed and looked out of the side viewports, knowing she wouldn't be able to see either Prowler but hoping they were farther along their routes than the timeframe that had elapsed.

"Aye, ma'am. Activating slipspace drive."

The micro jump lasted not even a few seconds, taking more time to enter and exit the Slipstream than actually being in it. _Eye of Karaan_ emerged, still fully cloaked, roughly ten kilometers port to _Dawning Prospect_. Melissa then activated the fault cycle of flickering shields and cloaking systems, giving the rest of the fleet the impression that the Corvette was still under duress.

The comm lit up immediately.

"_Eye of Karaan_, report."

Kandis held up her hand, forestalling Melissa's pre-recorded message.

The Sangheili in charge of _Dawning Prospect_ spoke up. "Fleetmaster, I told you the Corvette was experiencing system failures. Now you can clearly see that Iâ€"

"Silence." The gruff voice commanded. "_Eye of Karaan_, are you able to respond?"

Kandis snapped her fingers and the audio message began in all of its broken, simulated-static production.

"_This is_ Eye of Kar _we have . . . ffered . . . ems failure. Damage throughout our . . . Requesting per . . . dock and . . repairs_."

Kandis noticed a sly grin on Melissa's avatar's face. She was obviously proud of her work on the message and from the looks of the Fleetmaster's face that wavered into existence in the holo-globe, the gambit had worked.

"_Eye of Karaan_, if you can hear this transmission, hold station while we send an escort hauler out to you."

Kandis drew a finger across her throat and the recording cut out. "Okay, so it looks like Plan B is in effect. Full stop."

Melissa turned to face her. "You didn't actually think they'd let us dock with the Command Ship, did you?"

"Wishful thinking." Kandis motioned to the viewscreens, noticing the peculiar pattern of the Covenant ships. "How is their fleet organized out there?"

"Quite defensively, actually," Rolf commented, walking over from her station, as the viewscreens switched over to a tactical representation of the ships in system. "The Command Ship, which is oddly not a Cruiser of any type, is the heavily-modified Covenant Frigate seen at the center of the group of 15 ships. The seven Corvettes, _Eye of Karaan_'s counterparts, are escorting the four refueling vessels, which are quite large, I might say."

Kandis blinked at the understatement. Between the refuelers and the twelve massive freighters arrayed in a diamond pattern five kilometers off the Command Ship's starboard side, seeing the Resource Fleet up close and personal put their mission into a whole new perspective. With so few escort warships to buffet the Covenant's numbers, it truly was secrecy that they relied upon the most. _And now that cover is blown_.

The rest of the Covenant vessels were smaller patrol craft, mostly Banshees, that didn't venture too far from the main group. All in all, it wasn't that impressive, given the Covenant norm.

Rolf shifted her weight. "According to the previous transmissions' trajectory, the Minister of Conversion is on the Frigate." She turned around to face Kandis. "Should we mark that as our primary target?"

Kandis didn't answer right away. The overall mission parameters were fairly loose: Inflict as much damage to the Resource Fleet as possible and maintain a measure of safety so all UNSC personnel can fall back to Rally Point Alpha. _Eye of Karaan_'s mission, though, was to buy as much time for the Prowlers to get into position to launch their assault. The mission planning was much more in-depth,

but much of the actions of the Prowlers would depend upon the Corvette's position, the whereabouts of her crew, and possibility of detection.

If they really wanted to hurt this small Covenant fleet, taking out its main ships would be ideal . . . _but cutting off the head of the snake could be more effective in the long run_. "Mark the Frigate as 'Alpha Target' and begin categorization of the 14 other ships in its group."

"Captain, we have our escort vectoring in," the sensors officer said.

Kandis' stare shot over to Melissa. "Are you certain they won't just send a shuttle over or request we do the same?"

"Not completely, but it makes the most sense. Transmitting Slipspace coordinates over the airwaves isn't nearly as exciting as handing them over on a datapad. The Covenant tends to stand on ceremony, Captain."

As the escort hauler locked its gravity field around _Eye of Karaan_'s midsection, the ship's own gravity buckled briefly. There was a series of tones from a console to Kandis' left, and the two ships began to move in tandem towards the main central group of 15 ships.

While Melissa smiled satisfactorily, Kandis couldn't breathe any easier. With each successful step of Plan B, it took them deeper into the point of no return.

As the central viewscreen switched to an exterior view, it showed the Frigate and its surrounding vessels growing larger with each passing second. A heaviness seemed to fall upon the bridge crew and Kandis could have sworn the lights dimmed slightly when they entered into the proverbial shadow of the 15-ship cluster.

She turned around and caught the Spartan's attention. She had remained completely still the entire time, waiting for her moment to be useful. "It's time, Spartan," Kandis said.

Spartan-458, abandoning the rank and file protocol of a salute, simply nodded. Kandis imagined she was smiling behind her visor.

* * *

><p>The curving, bulbous shape of the Covenant Frigate was enough to invoke dreadful memories of the last engagement Captain Galin Thorm had been involved in. But this time it wasn't massing above a rural settlement on a Human colony world, it was still and quiet, waiting for the Eye of Karaan to come along side of it and dock. But they would soon realize that docking wasn't an option and would have to request a shuttle be sent.

I still can't believe our luck. The Covies are just falling right into our hands. Galin swallowed, as the Time-To-Target indicator counted down painfully slowly. _That's if Kandis can keep them at bay for as long as possible_. He knew she would risk her own safety for the sake of the mission, but giving her command of the Corvette kept her honest. She wouldn't jeopardize anyone's lives more than what was

called for.

"Jovan, is there any sign that the Covenant have been alerted to our presence or _Apocolypso_'s?"

"Nothing defensively." Jovan's avatar folded his arms across his chest. "If anything it's going to be those Banshees that might ram into us when we get closer."

"Keep analyzing their patrol patterns. If we have to get in real close, we'll try to find a hole in their flight paths." He looked up at his weapons officer. "Are the HORNET Mines ready yet?"

"Yes, sir. They're loaded into weapons launch bays One through Six." The officer met Galin's gaze. "Should we begin?"

Galin rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Let's wait until we know those Banshee patrols won't crash into them after their launch. Jovan, gather more data and we'll see where we are in twenty minutes. That will at least give us enough time to get close enough to tag those Corvettes."

As the orders were acknowledged, he leaned back in his command chair, only to be startled when Jovan appeared right beside him on his auxiliary pedestal. "Yes, Jovan?"

The AI's voice was barely above a whisper. "Sir, what if Captain Jokling and her crew are unable to send out the signal to launch the attack?"

"If', Jovan," Galin admonished, trying to sound more confident than he felt. There was a heavy weight placed upon his lover, and she was a strong woman with "Colonel" written in her future, but the stakes might be too high. She had options and it was up to her to carry them out. Galin didn't like it anymore than if he was ordering them to her directly, but it was the only way they could eliminate such a grave threat to the UNSC. "If," he echoed once more.

* * *

><p>Amanda Greene could feel the eyes of her bridge crew bearing down on her. If it was indecision they were worried about, they were wrong. Timing was everything, when revealing a cloaked ship to the enemy, but they still had a ways to go. Any delay, though, and the UNSC crew aboard Eye of Karaan would be left without backup.

So much of the planning was based upon maximum damage versus survival rate. The loss of tankers and the freighters would hinder the Resource Fleet's efforts to set up a base of operations, but taking out the Frigate and its escorts would deal a blow to the Covenant that would be felt all the way back to their main fleets. _Many options, many tactics, only two plausible outcomes._

Survivability was a low priority, whether the UNSC crews knew that or not, and given the success rate of UNSC engagements with Covenant vessels, their future was bleak. Amanda shook the thought away and focused on the battlefield. The element of surprise was a huge advantage, and she hoped to use it several times today.

"Melissa, enhance the view on the main group," Amanda asked. When the AI complied from her central pedestal, the main viewscreen magnified the image. Her forehead creased when she made out the smaller escort ships. "Are those . . . freighters?"

"Appears so, ma'am." Melissa continued to zoom in on one and brought up statistical data in several windows around the craft. "Like the Command Ship, they are heavily modified."

"In what way, exactly?"

"They are definitely hauling cargo, as you can see the removable storage containers along their sides, but it's their crew I'm curious about. At this range I can't detect any lifeforms on board, but I think they are slaved to the Frigate, using it as a master controller."

"So they're automated." Amanda pursed her lips. That made logistical sense. "Armaments?"

Melissa's avatar shrugged. "Typical Point-Defense Systems, mainly to fend off fighters. Nothing heavy enough to take us down."

Not much of a threat. _Still, automated freighters aren't normal for the Covenant_. The view zoomed out and she could see _Dawning Prospect_ taking up a position below the Command Ship at a distance of a few kilometers. "Okay, what about the smaller frigates, like _Dawning Prospect_?"

"Same armament as our previous escort. Their fleet positions suggest they are preparing to enter slipspace at any given moment."

"Which is what we're going to deny them." Amanda sat up and cracked her knuckles. "Alright, Melissa. The hard part is up to you."

The AI smiled.

14. Chapter 14

Chapter 14

T'alman Val wasn't considered a brave Sangheili soldier. He was satisfied with his role in the Covenant, though: piloting a shuttle for dignitaries attached to the Minister of Conversion. He wasn't a shrewd San'Shyuum, like others he had met, but he didn't like to be bothered with unnecessary details. That was the Minister's biggest complaint with his minions, and Val had certainly crossed that line before. Val's reprimand involved being knocked down a rank only to work back up to it after a year of dedicated service to the Minister and honing his piloting skills.

So when the call came in that _Eye of Karaan_, the Corvette to be basked in praise and glory for finding a back door for their "secret" mission, could not dock with _Harrowing Faith_, the flagship frigate of the Minister of Conversion, Val was ordered to take his shuttle to dock with the Corvette and bring back the Shipmaster so he could personally hand over the coordinates to the Minister. It was a great honor, and Val was flushed with excitement.

The two Sangheili bodyguards clad in their grandiose armor, which was more for show and wouldn't do much in a fight, were waiting for him at the base of the shuttle's ramp. The private landing bay provided access to the Minister's chambers, and Val held back a grin, momentarily taking pride that he was among a select few that had a right of entry to the Minister. Other than a single Unggoy that was operating a floor cleaning unit near the blast door that Val had just exited, there was no one else around.

Val nodded to the warriors before ducking inside the craft. Neither Sangheili acknowledged him, but followed him inside nonetheless. The shuttle was lavishly furnished, complete with a personal washroom, the finest grade of _knachtahyde_-lined couches, and elegantly crafted dark wood molding from select forests on Sanghelios. The main cabin narrowed toward the cockpit, and Val left the fine-grain veneered wood door open, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Shipmaster's expression when he would enter the shuttle. But as he prepared his startup procedure, one of the warriors sealed the door behind him.

Only slightly flummoxed by the gesture, he settled his mind on the preparations. His pre-flight went flawlessly and the shuttle was soon lifting off the deck and breaking through the energy field into hard vacuum. He worked the controls and sent the craft on a lazy arc towards the Corvette. Gone was the escort hauler, and _Eye of Karaan_ was now stationed directly starboard to _Harrowing Faith_, the two mighty ships' bows opposite one another.

The Corvette was still suffering from the erratic shield and cloaking malfunction, and every exterior shutter that Val could see was locked closed. _Which means the large docking bay will not be accessible_. Val let a grin tug at the crease in between his right mandibles_. Just another opportunity to show the Minister how good of a pilot he has_.

He brought the shuttle around to the Corvette's starboard side and saw the brief flicker of warning lights that lined the circular hatch that was parallel with the ship's midline halfway down its neck. _Ah, there it is_. He used a generated holographic outline to keep a continual image of the hull so the cloaking systems wouldn't throw him off. The shuttle slowed and he activated the docking tube to extend out. It wasn't the most glamorous way to board a shuttle, but it was utilitarian enough to get the job done.

Watching on a monitor, the graphic readout lined up with the hatch and the docking tube locked in place. He waited for the Corvette to neutralize pressure with the tube, and kept his eyes on the two dimensional image that now showed an interior view of the through-way tunnel, hoping for a peak of the Shipmaster entering the tube and stepping onto his ship.

A warning klaxon flashed red and blurted out a series of tones. Switching it off, Val swore out loud and helplessly watched the monitor's image fill with steam clouds, completely obscuring his view. The Corvette's atmosphere must have been completely freezing to warrant such a massive burst of steam and condensation. He knew he would be blamed for the mishap, even though it was the Corvette's own airlock that was to blame.

Val's hands tightened into fists but he forced them open. If it was

any other San 'Shyuum, he would have reported the incident then and there and more than likely kept an open line of communication for any updates . . . but the Minister of Conversion would be annoyed with details that didn't warrant his opinion on the matter. Val sighed and squinted at the monitor. A figure did appear, but it was too hard to tell if it was the Shipmasterâ€"it was moving too fast.

Through the veneered wood door, Val thought he heard one of the Sangheili say something that he didn't relay through the shuttle's internal comm system. Then he heard a series of muffled thuds and a short staccato of hurried footsteps growing louder with each fraction of a second.

Val spun around in his chair just in time to see a blurry figure encased in dull green armor break the door down and reach for Val's throat. The figure was too fast, and Val was lifted from his loose restraints and hauled out into the main cabin. He was thrown to the floor and landed hard on the two bodyguards that were lying unmoving. His head hit something hard and stars exploded before his eyes.

Before he could even reach for his sidearm, the steam before him parted with a swirl and the figure was upon him again, this time grabbing the back of his uniform and lifting him up like some feline being inspected by its handler. It was only then that his mind finally caught up with the events that had just played out.

Val was looking straight into the reflective visor of a Demon, and it was at the moment that he realized that this "minor" detail would have been something worthy of the Minister's attention. He closed his eyes and accepted his fate.

* * *

><p>The Demon shifted its grip and snapped Val's neck, quickly and quietly.<p>

Nicole took the data chip fragment of Melissa and inserted it into the Covenant shuttle's cockpit console. The AI's image appeared in holo-form immediately.

"Are you going to clean up your mess?" Melissa asked very motherly.

The Spartan cracked a smile. The AI, while annoying at times, did have her moments. "Don't want to throw off any body signature scans the Covies might direct our way." She plopped down in the pilot's vacant seat as the docking tube began to retract.

"Then you might want to rearrange them in a less . . . suggestive manner."

Nicole glanced back over her shoulder, saw the pile of dead Elites practically on top of one another, and laughed out loud.

"It wouldn't matter, anyway. This is a political vessel and it has plenty of sensor deterrents for such things." Melissa's expression soured. "I do wish you would have accepted Thorm's suggestion to bring a squad from his Security Detail along. Things are likely to get a bit loud and bright in the next few minutes."

"They would have complicated things," she said distractedly. "Less ID chips to monitor," she said, her eyes going over the shuttle's controls. "Can you fly this thing, or should I?"

Melissa's reply was to pull the shuttle away from Eye of Karaan and put her on a return course, following the same flight path the previous pilot had taken.

As Nicole looked out the viewports and saw the Covenant formation all around them, it made her wonder if Melissa could really do what she had promised. So much of this portion of the mission was reliant upon the UNSC AI's ability to interface with the Covenant Frigate's systems—and for a fragment of an AI, no less. Still, Melissa had managed to take complete control over Eye of Karaan without breaking a sweat.

The shuttle passed through the energy field and entered the small docking bay. Melissa rotated the craft 180 degrees, with the cockpit facing out to look at the stars, and set the shuttle down gently. The AI shifted her stance. "The bay is empty. No other lifeforms that I can detect using this shuttle's sensors."

Nicole rose from the captain's chair and pulled her MA5B from the magnetic strip on the back of her armor. She hefted the assault rifle in her hands. "Can you give me some sort of floor plan for the Frigate?"

Melissa nodded. "Yank me and find a terminal. With luck, I'll be able to access Harrowing Faith's systems from there, but I can't promise anything. We might have to find something deeper in the Frigate, where there's higher access."

Nicole reached out and pulled the data chip from the console. Melissa's avatar vanished as the shuttle's ramp lowered. Taking a deep breath, the Spartan stepped out onto the ramp and into the bay.

* * *

><p>"We are in position, Captain," Jovan announced proudly. Nagamo was now stationed below the cluster of the three refuelers and the dozen massive freighters with the seven Corvettes arrayed in a loose diamond formation around them: one to starboard, one to port, one below, one above, one aft, and two leading the group. The nearest Corvette looked identical to Eye of Karaan, but did have its forward shutters open fully, giving some distinction to the otherwise carbon-copy group.

"Word must be spreading that the fleet is about to move; most of the patrol craft are returning to the modified-Frigate," the AI continued.

"Yes," Thorm said, studying the Banshees looping back around one last time. "Move us into position. Weapons, on my mark, launch the mines and prep the rest for immediate deployment." He turned to Jovan. "Don't arm them until we receive the signal from Captain Jokling."

"Aye, Sir," came the reply from both officer and AI.

As _Nagamo_ drifted slowly under the sensor shadow of the great refuelers, Thorm nodded. "Mark."

Silently and smoothly, the HORNET mines exited their launch tubes and stealthily traveled to their destinations, some almost 50 kilometers away. Even if there was a local sun to illuminate the mines, they were non-reflective and near completely undetectable to any system, Covenant or otherwise.

"Captain, Weapons Bay is reporting 'ready' for the next batch," the Weapons officer said.

"Launch the rest."

As the remaining mines were jettisoned, Galin knew he had to time this just right. The backup tactic was to simulate the refueling tankers sudden implosion and subsequent explosions as a horrific accident at first, just in case timing issues with _Eye of Karaan_ and _Apocolypso_ weren't synced exactly. When the seven Corvettes found themselves steering clear of the debris, they will be met with the remaining cluster of mines. The dozen freighters had minimal weapons, so they were the lowest priority for Thorm. If they weren't evaporated in the tankers' explosions, he could still easily evade them.

"Alright, Jovan, take us to the back of the group." Thorm motioned to the two rear-most freighters. "We can come right into their wake if the shooting starts and we need some makeshift cover. They'll think twice about firing close to those freighters."

As _Nagamo_ eased into position, ready to strike at the moment _Eye of Karaan_ was able to signal them, Galin hoped that Captain Greene was almost finished with her battle preparations. Apocolypso's task was to take out the escort frigates and neutralize the Command Ship, if need be. Greene also expressed concern that _Eye of Karaan_ might fall under suspicion and attack earlier than they could anticipate. While the Corvette wasn't completely unarmed, Galin didn't want Kandis thrown into a skirmish with an unfamiliar ship.

When the time came, he would do his best to preserve as many Human lives as possible.

"Shuttle launch!" The sensors officer called out.

"Track it," Galin ordered, already seeing the sleek ship exit the Command Ship and head towards the adjacent Corvette. The viewscreen display zoomed out and showed the rest of the Banshees entering at least four narrow docking bays on the modified-frigate now tagged "_Harrowing Faith_."

The shuttle docked for a moment and then head back to the lone bay fixed near the top of the crest of _Harrowing Faith_'s bow. But his eyes had been locked on the Corvette and its flickering cloaking system, waiting to see if there was the signal they had been waiting for. "Jovan?"

"There it is," the AI said nonchalantly.

Since they couldn't very well transmit a code, even on the Covenant

bandwidths, Melissa had recommended they take advantage of the cloaking system failure and add their own algorithm into the random cycle to establish a collective point that the UNSC-controlled ships could sync together. Galin squinted at the viewscreen, wondering when exactly Melissa was able to flash such a coded message; he had been watching the entire time. "Are you sure?"

Apparently Jovan could detect Galin's uncertainty. "It only lasted a few nanoseconds, Captain." The AI stood a little straighter on his pedestal. "Melissa's fragment reports that the Spartan has successfully commandeered the shuttle and Captain Jokling has started the countdown, Mark: plus eight seconds."

On the other viewscreen, a countdown appeared, shaving off the eight seconds Jovan had calculated. Galin swallowed. "Alright, everyone. This is it." His gaze fell back on Eye of Karaan and he silently pleaded that Kandis would know when to run.

* * *

><p>Rolf Sorenson tried to batten down her anxiousness. The Spartan now had less than 10 minutes to get Melissa into Harrowing Faith's systems and start the process of their attack, but it was the crew of Eye of Karaan that had to be without the AI for the duration. Leaving all of us to pull double duty.

Professor Sorvad walked up from behind her. "No need for worry," he said quietly. "That Spartan will get the job done."

"It's not the Spartan I'm worried about."

Sorvad chuckled and placed a reaffirming hand on Rolf's shoulder. "Melissa will get the Frigate under control, I have no doubt. Her generation of AIs was bred with this very thing in mind."

He just doesn't get it. "And us?" she asked. "There are about a thousand things that could go wrong with this plan, and our only contingency is to get clear of the engagement zone and enter the Slipstream."

Apparently she had retorted a bit too loudly and Captain Jokling got up from her command chair and walked over to Rolf's station. Whether she had planned it or not, Jokling's hair was draped forward over the swell of her chest, giving her a slightly seductive look, and her narrowed eyes only added to the demeanor. "There's slightly more to it, Sorenson. Our parameters are based upon the idea that we are the Neutral Target, so to speak. The Covies will think twice about taking us out." She smiled. "Our illusion of being crippled will see to that as well. And we are not completely defenseless either."

And with that, Rolf clenched her mouth shut. This was no way to act during a possible evaluation period for a permanent post on an ONI vessel. She definitely had hopes of serving aboard Apocolypso fulltime, but the more immediate threat of her career was her current predicament of being in the middle of an engagement zone.

"It's a matter of knowing when to run," Kandis continued. She began a slow walk back to her chair. "Which in our case is fairly soon. Once the countdown is complete, we run our system failures simulations and go dark, drifting away from the fleet. Hopefully, confusion will

reign and the Prowlers will do their work as well_. Eye of Karaan_ becomes an unneeded distraction while the surviving fleet tries to make sense of what is happening, and we vanish into the Slipstream."

Rolf wanted to snort at the gross simplification of their plan. She also didn't take Captain Jokling for an optimist. A realist, at most, but not an optimist. It had to be a masked malaise put on to show the crew that she was confident in their success. In the end, it didn't matter. Rolf took Jokling as a survivor by nature, and the fact that Sorvad was still on board meant they held the 'save the civilians first' card.

But then there was the Spartan. Rolf felt a heat rush into her and settle in the location it normally did when thinking about those she lusted after. She let her mind drift to the abbreviated encounter with the teen, but knew she could get lost in the details, and she shook her head, willing away the recent memories.

The Spartan technically had the most weight placed on her shoulders. Her success was tied into the AI fragment she carried, but her survival was something no one else could predict. Her escape from the Frigate was a matter of improvisation, something Spartans had a knack for—so Rolf had heard. Still, there was a portion of her emotions that generated more than enough anxiousness for Nicole's success.

All Rolf could do now was to wait.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Nicole stealthily moved down the long, empty corridor, wondering if the Covenant engineers designed such a defensible position on purpose or had opted for grand opulence as their goal. Either way, it kept Nicole on her toes. Plasma turrets could have been in place behind hidden panels or secret doors could have allowed Unggoy to slip out behind her, but no such tactic was used.

The corridor eventually spilled out into a half-circle foyer with three doors to choose from. There were no guards at the doors, but there were visible energy shields barring entrance from further venture. Whether by luck or design, there was a central terminal that rose up from the deck and Nicole checked her corners one last time before placing the AI data chip into the slot. Melissa didn't appear right away. "Melissa?" Nicole whispered.

It took almost a solid minute before the AI's hologram appeared above the terminal. "Apologies, Spartan. Their network is a bit more complex than the Corvette."

"Have you been able to—"

"Not from this terminal. We'll need to find something with a bit more access." Melissa paused. "There, I set a waypoint on your HUD. That should get us to the Minister's Chambers without much fuss."

The blue icon appeared in her Heads-Up-Display, and Nicole noted the

distance. "Hostiles?"

Melissa offered a grin. "Of course."

The middle door's energy field collapsed and Nicole retrieved the data chip from the terminal. She crouch-walked over to the left side of the door and immediately caught two red dots on her motion tracker. They were spaced evenly apart roughly ten meters ahead.

Getting her combat knife ready, she hit the release panel and the door retracted into the ceiling silently. But she didn't enter; she knew the guards would be facing towards her. Once the door returned closed, she activated the panel again. She repeated this process twice more before she saw one of the red dots start to move toward her slowly.

Crouching down even more, Nicole prepared herself. Gauging the distance on her motion tracker to see when the guard was almost to the door, she hit the panel release for the last time and sprang into action. With bone-jarring force, she swung the butt of her MA5B into the Sangheili Honor Guard's throat, immediately crippling his vocal chords. As he doubled over, she slammed the rifle against the back of his neck, sending him tumbling to the floor in a heap.

With incredible speed, she grabbed her combat knife and hurled it at the now-approaching guard with his energy sword activated, ready to attack. The Honor Guard didn't have time to dodge, and the knife plunged into his chest, through his ceremonial armor. Nicole bolted to the staggering Sangheili, crossing the distance to him before he could bring his sword up for defense, and she landed a kick to his midsection, sending him bouncing off the short hallway's wall. She brought her left fist down hard on his right hand, causing his grip on his weapon to loosen and extinguish the energy sword all together.

As the Sangheili slumped down the curved wall, Nicole found her knife's hilt, shoved it deeper into his chest, and then pulled it out. With one final blow, she brought her right elbow across the guards face and he fell silent to the ground.

As Nicole sheathed her combat knife, she glanced down at the deactivated energy sword, but thought against trying to utilize the unfamiliar weapon. She hunched over the fallen Honor Guard, noting that her motion tracker was clear, and double checked to see if he was indeed dead.

Satisfied with the small victory in the hallway, Nicole stood and entered the attached room, scanning for threats that wouldn't register on her HUD. The small room was nothing more than an opulent guard room, complete with a terminal check-in and more energy field generators. There was only one more set of doors that led to where the waypoint was hovering, and Nicole hurtled the check-in terminal, starting for the final entrance.

Nicole came up to the petal-shaped door, but found it didn't open when she approached. There was no access panel to be found around its frame, so she went back to the check-in desk and inserted the AI data chip into the terminal.

"Really?" Melissa said, with hands on hips, as her avatar illuminated over the terminal. "You still have a little farther to go," she added, nodding in the direction of the petal doors.

"Can you unlock them, please?" Nicole asked, in one huffing breath. She didn't have time for AI antics.

The doors chimed but did not open. "Done." Melissa held up a hand, to forestall a premature interjection. "There's only one occupant in the Chambers," she said, her voice now back to a professionalism reserved for Captains and Generals. "Make sure he doesn't signal the rest of the ship."

Nodding, Nicole pulled the data chip out and secured it once more. She placed her MA5B against the magnetic strip on her back and opted for her sidearm. It would be more accurate than her rifle. Taking one last prefatory breath, the Spartan stepped forward and into the Minister's Chambers.

Nicole's first impression of the scarcely furnished room was that of a humble servant, satisfied with little, and going against everything she had read about San 'Shyuum opulence. The oval-shaped room had a single raised section at its center where a gravity field encased a floating globe of water, complete with various sea creatures of all shapes and colors no bigger than the size of Nicole's hand. Off to the right was a door that most likely held the Minister's sleeping arrangements, and to the left was a section that lowered into a small lounge area, complete with couches and what looked like a refreshment bar.

And seated with his back to Nicole was the Minister of Conversion. Dressed in a ceremonial purple robe, but lacking any sign of jewelry or headdress, he was without the standard hover-chair. When the doors shut behind Nicole, he perked up and said something in the Covenant Tongue. When Nicole didn't response, he slowly looked over his shoulder and spied her out of the corner of his eye. That one wide eye grew in size and he quickly glanced over to a small comm device placed on the top of the refreshment bar.

Nicole was quick to act and raised her M6 pistol, shaking her head and crossing the distance to stand in between the comm device and the Minister. "Not going to happen," she said, wondering if he could even understand her. Keeping her pistol sights trained on the San 'Shyuum, she consulted the waypoint and found the terminal right next to the handheld comm device. She slid the AI data chip in and Melissa immediately appeared above the low-profile table that sat in the middle of the lounge. "Your turn, Melissa," she said.

"On it."

"What's our time look like?"

Melissa folded her arms across her chest. "We are cutting it a little close. T-minus 3 minutes, 13 seconds." Before Nicole could respond, the AI nodded. "Accessing the ship's systems. This will take a moment."

"You don't have a moment," Nicole muttered, focusing her attention back on the Minister. He looked like most San 'Shyuum she had seen in stock images, but without all the ornate accessories he looked . . .

more reserved, meek, even. His expression, if she could read alien faces at all, had changed from shock to confusion. "Just stay put, alright?" she ordered, holding up a hand for emphasis.

"You are making a grave mistake," the Minister said in near-perfect English.

Nicole's eyes grew wide. "What?" she breathed in reaction to hearing an alien speak her own language.

"We do not seek war or conquest." The Minister dipped his head in a sort of humbling gesture. "We only seek to enlighten."

"Save it," Nicole said. She had dealt with enough Innies to know when someone was trying to talk their way out of a sticky situation. "All I have seen of the Covenant _has been_ war and conquest." She glanced over to Melissa. "How's it coming?"

"Nearly complete. I'm establishing a link with the remote freighters."

"We come to share a truth with you," the Minister continued. "There is no need for further violence." He lowered his head solemnly. "I am here on my own accord, separate from the Prophets that you fight against."

"Enough!" Nicole shouted, her patience nearly dry.

"I have control," Melissa announced. "T-Minus 20 seconds. Preparing to fire."

"Please, you must understand," the Minister pleaded, stealing a glance at the AI. "We are not here for battle, but wantâ€"

"Shut up!" She hissed through clenched teeth. Nicole couldn't take the babbling Covenant leader anymore and backhanded his face, spinning him around and crashing to the floor. Nothing he could say could justify saving his fleet from carrying out their surprise attack on Human worlds. Nicole had seen her fair share of Human losses at the hands of the Covenant, and it was finally time to exact a little retributionâ€"personally.

"Three, Two, One, Mark."

"Mark!" Amanda Greene called out.

The mines _Apocolypso_ laid out for the enemy frigates raced in on their assigned targets, crossed the short distances, and detonated against shields and hulls in a spectacular scene of destruction. Ardent fire consumed all but one of the frigates as secondary explosions broke the ships completely apart. The one frigate that had miraculously avoided a defunct mine was now drifting away with a large section of its starboard side engulfed in flame. Sensors reported that it was _Eye of Karaan_'s previous escort shipâ€"or what was left of it.

"Melissa, what's the status on the Command Ship?"

"Currently unresponsive." She blinked. "I believe . . . I did it."

Amanda didn't allow herself a sigh of relief just yet. "What about _Nagamo_?"

The main viewscreen zoomed out and gave a wide angle of the battlefield. The entire enemy group that was assigned to _Nagamo_ was utterly engulfed in a series of rolling explosions quickly expanding outward, consuming Corvettes and escort ships alike. It was almost unbelievable to witness such massive destruction from such a small UNSC force, but it wasn't over yet. The surviving ships, if any, would now launch advanced sensor nets and be looking for cloaked vessels.

Captain Greene's hand rested above the comm button on her command chair. She had to choose the right moment to risk a transmission to _Nagamo_ and _Eye of Karaan_. And seeing the growing fireball where _Nagamo_ would be approximately located, made her finger itch.

*** **

>"Let's move!" Thorm shouted.<p>

The HORNET mines had done their work, albeit a bit too boldly, and now Jovan was pushing _Nagamo_ clear of the blast area that had expanded to four times the predicted size. The mines' effectiveness was both good and bad. "Good" in the sense that it had taken out all of the assigned ships. "Bad" in the sense that _Nagamo_ was too close to the exploding vessels.

"Jovan?" Thorm inquired, sounding only slightly panicked.

"On it, Sir." The AI revved the ship's drive to full, blasting away from the spinning portion of a burning aft from one of the Corvettes. The Prowler dipped below the debris, narrowly avoiding a collision, as more explosions sent chunks of Covenant ships to ricochet off its ablative, cloaked hull.

Nagamo shuddered and strained under the maneuver, as red warning lights flashed throughout the bridge. "Damage report!"

Jovan stood tall. "Captain, our cloaking system is failing. We took a wash of debris from the nearest blast, and we have several small hull breaches. Sealing off the appropriate cabins."

The technician manning the Cloaking Systems lifted his head up, wearing a dour expression. "We will risk overloading our reactor if we try to maintain full cloak capabilities. We have to shut it down."

Galin swallowed hard, knowing the full ramifications of running without the stealth systems engaged. Even with every Covenant ship in his vicinity either completely destroyed or severely damaged, his Prowler wasn't a combat vessel. Once they lost their cloaking abilities, their role would be extremely diminished.

As the last few explosions began to collapse in on themselves, _Nagamo_'s hull flickered like a failing lighthouse during a rolling fog. He sighed. "Shut it down, then." Thorm raised his chin. "And keep our slipspace drive ready for a quick exit."

Watching the sensor readings on the main viewscreen, he could see the

fight wasn't completely over. "And warm up the turrets," he added. "We're not out of this battle yet."

Even with the countdown displayed above her terminal, Rolf jumped at the sudden brilliance from the Corvette's viewports. All around _Eye of Karaan_, Covenant ships exploded and vaporized in their own collapsing reactors. It seemed like a holo-film in slow motion, how one of the refuelers erupted and sent its ignited fuel to engulf its friendly escorts. _Too strongly, in fact_. Rolf frowned and watched the fireball expand at a growing, rapid pace, too fast for conventional Covenant fuel. It was more akin to the UNSC fuel, Triamino Hydrazine.

But why would a Covenant refueler be carrying N2H4 for a resource fleet? Rolf shuddered with a thought. She brought up the Covenant ship-types and compared them to the images of the actual vessels. No exterior modifications that she could see would allow for using N2H4 as their own fuel. _What was their reason for bringing it here?_

"Ma'am, I'm getting a sensor reading on _Nagamo_," the sensors officer called.

"What?" Kandis Jokling blurted out, unable to hide her surprise. "Why are they not cloaked?"

"Must have taken some damage in the subsequent explosions."

Rolf brought up the expanded view of the battlefield and sent the image to the holo-globe. "At least the enemy ships appear to be mostly destroyed or incapacitated. Even the Command Ship is unresponsive." Rolf breathed a little easier, knowing the Spartan had completed her mission of inserting Melissa into the Frigate's systems. "_Apocolypso_ has taken out all but one of the escort ships."

The rest of the image was a blur of dying explosions, fire quickly succumbing to the lack of material left to consume. What came in the wake of such utter destruction was an oddly quiet scene. The systematic elimination of the Covenant ships had been severe and nearly perfect in execution—while each ship was running silent and cloaked.

But there was a hesitation for celebration on the bridge of _Eye of Karaan_. They were still aboard a captured enemy vessel, and millions of kilometers away from the nearest UNSC stronghold. And locally, there were still Covenant combatants floating in space around them, regardless of their current functionality. They were not out of the woods just yet.

"Slipstream rupture detected!"

The holo-globe's view expanded outward even farther, as a glowing ring of a slipstream portal appeared. Rolf looked up and out the starboard viewport to see the opening for herself.

"Who is running?" Kandis asked, her eyes darting back and forth between the main viewport and the holo-globe. "Can we stop them in time?"

"No one's leaving," Rolf breathed, seeing the beginning outline of a ship emerging from the black void. "Someone just arrived." But when the sleek shape of a Covenant Destroyer was fully in realspace and the Slipstream closed behind it, Rolf's mouth hung open. _Impossible_.

Reinforcements had arrived.

16. Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Exiting from the Slipstream well away and above the plain of battle, the angular yet bulbous bow of the Destroyer began a slow turn towards the Command Ship. The sharp, fin-like stabilizers of its aft made for a menacing sight.

"Comms! Send a tight-beam transmission to _Nagamo_ and tell them to take cover in the debris field." Kandis looked up and visibly swallowed. "We have unwelcomed company."

"Aye, ma'am."

Rolf stood and felt her heart beating in her head. Her terminal made a ping sound, and the new ship's name came up on her display with the Human translation: _Consistent Rapture_. She quickly clicked on the data file attached to the name and sank back in her chair. The Covenant Destroyer, according to _Eye of Karaan_'s logs, was recently assigned to the current Arbiter, Th'ul Vilumee. She had vaguely heard of that title given to outcast Covenant members, but she had no idea that they would be allowed a ship to command.

"_Shit_," Kandis swore aloud. "They don't look friendly."

"Of course not," Rolf nearly snorted. "We're sitting ducks out here."

"No," Professor Sorvad said, rising from his station. "I don't think they're here for us; they're here for _them_." He pointed to the initial sensor readout on an auxiliary viewscreen. "No ship could response to such an attack this soon. They are already targeting the Command Ship and have us in their sights as well. We just happen to be in a Covenant vessel. They don't appear to be aware of the Prowlers."

Rolf felt a fresh wave of embarrassment wash down her face but recomposed herself. "Then are we going to fall back to Rally Point Bravo?"

Kandis pursed her lips and consulted the various contacts and lack thereof on the battlefield layout. "Not without all of us leaving. And I do mean _all_ of us." She gave a confident nod. "Melissa, are you there?"

The holo-globe lit up with the AI's avatar. "Yes, Captain. I'm in control of _Harrowing Faith_. The new Destroyer is hailing us, but I currently have all of _Faith_'s communications locked. There is a surprisingly aggressive AI suppression system imbedded in the higher functions aboard this ship."

"Well, I don't think there's any use in staying there." Kandis licked her lips. "Spartan?"

"Yes, ma'am," the female super-soldier's voice came through the comm strong and confident.

"Can you secure transport off that ship and back on to _Eye of Karaan_?"

Before the Spartan could answer, the officer manning the sensor station spoke up. "New contacts, bearing 103.2. Four boarding craft with Seraph fighter escorts are exiting the Destroyer's hangar. ETA: 4 minutes."

* * *

><p>Hearing the sensor report, Nicole set her jaw and looked at Melissa's avatar floating above the short table in the Minister's lounge. "Affirmative, ma'am," she said in response to Captain Jokling's question. She nodded to the AI. "Time to go?" she asked, knowing full well it was but leaving options open to the AI if she had other ideas. She had certainly proven her worth during this engagement.<p>

"One moment," Melissa said, holding a hand up to her face and massaging her left temple. "There, that will leave them with something to deal with while we run." She squared her shoulders and nodded. "Let's go."

The Spartan glanced over to the slumped form of the San 'Shyuum. He was still alive but unconscious. Such a prisoner would be a data trove for ONI to mine, but she also knew trying to fight her way out of a Covenant ship while hauling dead weight was a dumb way to die.

"Leave him," Melissa said, her expression shifting to a somber look. "If I'm interpreting the Arbiter's hails correctly, he's already dead."

Not fully understanding but internally shrugging, Nicole bent down and pulled the data chip out. Holstering her sidearm and bringing out her MA5B once more, she took off for the private shuttle bay.

* * *

><p>Amanda Greene watched helplessly as the eight Seraph fighters escorted the four Phantoms toward Harrowing Faith. She knew she had to do something, but seeing as how she was the only ship that was completely hidden from the enemy she had to be careful.

"Captain Thorm is taking advantage of the debris field very well," Melissa commented.

Amanda's eyes fell upon the main viewscreen and she could see that _Nagamo_ had latched on to a large portion of debris from one of the Corvettes. It only half hid the Prowler, but Galin was using stabilizing thrusters to keep his ship hidden from plain view in the largest collection of debris. For now, it looked like Galin was okay.

Kandis Jokling, however, was in a bit of a tight spot. Amanda could see that Kandis had taken the Spartan as her own responsibility, thus the reason why Eye of Karaan was still not on her way out, heading to slipspace. She needed backupâ€”if all else failed.

But Amanda knew her own ship was limited in what it could do. Only having one remaining HORNET mine meant the most strategic sense was to use it for a distraction. The Covenant would certainly detect her warming up Apocolypso's turrets, so Amanda ordered the only thing she could think of: move her ship into a position that gave the most tactical approach to using her weaponry for maximum effect when the time came to use them.

"Bring us between Eye of Karaan and Nagamo's position, in the clearing near those smaller inert freighters. They're still inactive? Good. If we have to act quickly to either ship in distress, we'll be there."

Melissa frowned. "Captain I will advise that our window of retreat is rapidly closing."

"Noted." Amanda shifted her shoulders and could feel uneasiness settle upon the bridge crew. It wasn't for the neglect of regulations, though, but the realization that with the arrival of the Destroyer, their exit strategy just got a lot more complicated. The success of their attack would pale in comparison to losing either UNSC ship or human life in general.

* * *

><p>"Captain Jokling, we are being hailed," Eye of Karaan's comm officer said. "I'm not quite sure how to respond, ma'am."

Professor Sorvad perked up. "Don't. As far as Harrowing Faith knows, we are very much incapacitated." He raised his right index finger. "We can reenact our faulty cloaking systems too."

Considering the idea for a moment, Kandis spun around in her command chair. "Do it, but we'll hold our position as long as we can. I don't want our Spartan to have to go hunting for us." She glanced over to Rolf whose eyes were growing wide. "What?"

"I don't think it's the Spartan that's going to be hunting us," Rolf said, pointing to the sensor readouts. "One of the Phantoms is breaking off the main group and heading towards us."

"Maybe we should have responded," Sorvad muttered, sinking back into his chair.

"We had no way to respond, Professor," Kandis replied. "And we can't very well blow it out of the sky amidst our current situation." She shook her head. "What's that Phantom's ETA?"

"Three minutes, ma'am."

Stall, stall, stall. Kandis would bet that if she turned and ran, the Destroyer would count Eye of Karaan as a defying target, plain

and simple. Rolf Sorenson had explained to the crew that the Arbiter, a Covenant tool of vengeance so-to-speak, was aboard Consistent Rapture and she analyzed that he wouldn't think twice about halting ships fleeing his presence.

But she couldn't just let a Phantom land in the docking bay and see all of the ONI crates and power generators set up there. She spun back around. "Activate the portside docking collar. Maybe if we give them a designated access hatch we can dictate how long it takes them to get here."

As Rolf complied and set about the collar's activation, the rippling effect of the false-malfunctioning cloaking systems played out over the hull in a spectacular display of randomness fit for a UNSC AI's programming.

C'mon, Spartan, Kandis internally pleaded. Hurry it up.

* * *

><p>Nicole leaped over the guard post desk and started for the hallway she had previous came down. The fallen Honor Guards were still in their death poses, their blood covering the walls and decks now beginning to dry. While her motion tracker still showed she was clear, Nicole couldn't help but wonder what it would be like if Melissa's fragment was able to interface with her armor. Would she be able to keep an eye out for things I can't see? Could she interface faster with the Covenant panels? But it didn't matter; it wasn't possibleâ€”_yet_.

It wasn't until she came to the three-door foyer from earlier that she noticed the moving red dots on her HUD. Coming out of the central door, she could hear someone pounding on the door to her left quickly followed by pounding from the right. The lack of response from the Minister's chambers had sent his ship into chaosâ€”_and his crew into panic_. Hoping that Melissa had sealed the doors well enough, she ran down the corridor that led to the shuttle bay.

Part of Nicole wanted to stop and jam the AI data chip into a console to get an idea of troop movements throughout the ship, but she thought better of it and stopped short of the bay's entrance. Through the minute haze of the magnetic field that kept the atmosphere inside the bay, she could see several ships on approach in the distance. Several were heading her way; one was heading directly for the shuttle bay.

Breaking off in a sprint, Nicole crossed the distance to the shuttle and flew up the ramp. By the time she settled in the cockpit, a Phantom broke through the containment field and parked on the other side of the bay. Swearing to herself, Nicole plugged Melissa's data chip in the console.

The AI appeared instantly. "Don't activate the startup sequence yet," she said. "If we appear hostile, they'll blow us out of the sky before we even leave the bay."

"And if they see me?" Nicole whispered, pointing to the cockpit's viewports.

"They're reflective on the outside." Melissa shifted her feet. "Just

stay put for now."

Nicole watched as the Phantom parked and opened its ramp. Being merely a shuttle bay, the larger ship didn't have enough room to activate its gravity lift safely. From the rear of the craft poured half a dozen Sangheili warriors. The clear leader was in a unique set of silver armor, fashioned with an archaic look but still maintaining a prideful appearance, and he motioned for the rest to follow him. The group moved quickly into the corridor while a pair of guards took position at the base of the ramp.

"Not yet," Melissa cautioned. "Wait for the main group to get deeper into the ship."

But one of the guards pointed toward the shuttle and started for it. The other paused to follow and decided to cross the distance halfway between the Phantom and the shuttle, leaving his fellow guard to investigate on his own. Nicole nodded to the AI. "You get us out of here ASAP. I'll deal with him."

Taking a position beside the ramp's entrance, she knew all the Sangheili had to do was peek his head inside to see the two dead Covenant and get all the proof he needed of combatants on board. She put her rifle away and readied for action. The red dot on her motion tracker came closer and she saw the shadow of the guard splash across the shuttle's deck.

Brandishing his Plasma Rifle, the guard stepped up the ramp and Nicole reacted swiftly. Reaching partially behind the frame of the doorway, the Spartan grabbed the Sangheili's lowered, investigating head and flipped him head over hooves onto the padded deck. But the Sangheili wasn't as ill-trained as the other troops she had faced earlier and he managed to twist midway through the flip, landing on his side.

The Elite fired off a few rounds of plasma that the interior wall absorbed with fiery craters, but the last one struck Nicole's right shoulder, causing her to shift tactics. She quickly recovered and went for the weapon, but the Elite had predicted such a move and rolled with the tug on his arm that Nicole gave. It brought the Sangheili up onto his knees and he would have pinned Nicole to the deck, but the female Spartan let go of the weapon and brought her left elbow across his split jaw, only to bring it back down on the other side of his face.

The Elite was quick, though, and brought his left arm around Nicole's torso, pulling her in for a crippling squeeze. His grip was powerfully tight and Nicole tightened her abs as she felt the wind leave her lungs. She noticed another red dot on her motion tracker and calculated that into her next few moves.

Seeing his tactic working, the Elite brought his other arm around Nicole, attempting to heave her up off the ground. But Nicole reached out and pried his weapon-wielding hand away—finding the trigger mechanism in the process, and he fired out of reaction. The sputtered bursts from the Plasma Rifle created a line that traced from the top of the ceiling to the opened ramp doorway—and right at the other Elite guard. Taking several rounds to his chest, the newcomer staggered back.

Nicole held onto the trigger and kept firing, even after the Elite holding her lifted her up and tried to smash her into the interior cabin wall. Nicole suddenly let loose her grip on the weapon and spun around in the Elite's grip, utilizing the smooth surface of her armor's front midsection. She was now looking down at the snarling Elite and began to land blow after blow on his head. He let go, but she wrapped her legs around his torso. He tried to defend himself, but they both fell to the deck in a heap.

As soon as she made contact with the ground, Nicole loosened her legs and grabbed her combat knife. The Elite, disoriented from the Spartan's blows, tried to stop her with a punch to her chest, but she partially turned to deflect it and buried the knife hilt-deep into his neck. Without delaying, Nicole rolled on to her side and brandished her rifle. Leaping towards the ramp's doorway, she showered the slow-moving form of the other Elite with rounds that bounced off shield, armor, and flesh. He tried to dive for cover, but the MA5B proved too effective and he landed short of cover from the shuttle landing skid in a bloodied puddle.

"Melissa!" she called out.

"You better get strapped in first."

"Just get us out of here!" Nicole grabbed the first dead Elite guard by the collar and shoved him out the doorway and onto his compatriot. She slapped the ramp panel with a closed fist and the door sealed. It wasn't until she started for the cockpit that she could feel the discomfort in her side and shoulder. A portion of her armor was charred near her right shoulder and right side, but suit integrity was still uncompromised. It didn't mean that she wasn't hurting, but it wasn't anything she couldn't push through. She sat down in the pilot's chair and strapped in, being cautious about the restraint placement.

Outside the viewport, the Phantom's pilot began to grasp the situation and the bottom-slung plasma turret started to orient to target the shuttle. Melissa fired up the engines and the shuttle lifted off in sharp movements. While Nicole felt the shifts in gravity near disorienting, the turret's plasma fire wasn't able to find its target and the shuttle flew out of the bay unscathed.

"Hold on," Melissa said plainly. "We will likely have pursuit very quickly."

17. Chapter 17

Chapter 17

"Phantom inbound," the sensor officer called out.

Kandis stood up from her command chair. "Are they going for the docking collar?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." Kandis waved her arms to signal the crew it was time. "Let's go, people." She glanced over her shoulder at Professor Sorvad. "Have you finished?"

The older man scratched the beard on his chin. "Just another minute."

From across the bridge, already on her way out, Rolf Sorenson murmured. "We don't really have a minute, Professor."

Given their rapidly depleting options for action against the Covenant—and the fact that the Arbiter's ship now had them locked in its sights, Kandis had decided to abandon ship. But not before draining the databanks of information and accessing the Self-Destruct mechanism. Using the cloaking systems algorithms to covertly send out her plan to both Prowlers, she had hoped they would receive the message and provide the necessary EVAC her crew needed.

"There! It's all here." Sorvad got up off of his knees, unhooked the cables from the console to his datapad, and stood up, using his chair for leverage. He stuffed his datapad into the briefcase that held his datacards and other electronics. "I'm ready."

Kandis wanted to nod, wanted to smile, but the pressing issue of getting back to the docking bay was the more immediate action, and she took off in the wake of the others.

Rolf joined her at the bridge entrance. "You really think the Covenant troops are going to head straight here?"

Waiting for the last officer to exit the bridge, Kandis sealed the door behind her and motioned for Rolf to join her in a jog towards the ship's aft. "Let's just say it's what I would do to secure the ship."

"And what about our Spartan?" Sorvad asked, keeping pace a few feet behind. "Will she be able to interpret the message in time?"

"If Melissa is still with her, yes. Otherwise, she'll find out what's going on soon enough." Even to herself, the words sounded hollow to Kandis, but it was the best she could do with such short notice. The safety of her crew aboard the ship she was commanding was her immediate priority and she knew the Spartan could adapt to mission parameters better than anyone else.

But her mouth went dry when she remembered Galin. He was out there, floating in the debris field, just waiting for the others to get clear, she was sure. He wasn't a stubborn man, but one that sought the safety of his friends before his own. And that sort of reasoning could wind up getting himself and his crew killed if he stuck around for too much longer. Why don't you just slipspace jump out of here? Kandis silently pleaded. But it would be of no use to transmit that to him. She knew Galin felt responsible for getting everyone out of this fight alive, regardless of some joint mission control with Greene.

Pushing her worry aside, Kandis waved the others to hurry up. She definitely didn't want any UNSC personnel out in the main corridor when the Covenant showed up.

* * *

><p>"Message inbound," Melissa said through Apocolypso's

bridge speakers. "From _Eye of Karaan_."

"Audio?" Amanda Greene asked, hoping it wasn't. If Brevet Captain Jokling was transmitting in the open, then the mission was a complete bust.

"No, it's through the cloaking algo. Bringing it up now."

"_Our ship has been compromised. Self-Destruct activated and awaiting activation. EVAC requested at Docking Bay_."

Amanda leaned back in her chair. "_So this is it. Down to the wire_."
"Alright, let's go get them."

"Captain," Melissa interjected, "We won't be able to maintain our secrecy when we land inside the Docking Bay. They will suspect and focus their sensors when the Corvette's bay is opened."

"Then we'll just have to be quick."

Before _Apocolypso_ had even turned on a proper heading, the sensor officer called out. "A shuttle is outbound from the Command Ship."

"The Spartan?" Amanda asked, knowing the possibility that _Harrowing Faith_ could have sent out any number of flights to meet the Arbiter's ship for any number of reasons.

"Confirmed," Melissa said. "Though several Seraph Fighters have broken off the main group and look to either escort or engage."

"I'll assume the latter." Amanda frowned. Her ship was already maneuvering to pick up Jokling's crew, but she couldn't just leave the Spartan to fend for herself. She raised her head to look at the AI. "We still have one HORNET mine left, correct?"

"Affirmative."

Captain Greene watched the sensor readouts that displayed the shuttle taking an evasive route through the cloud of smaller freighters with the Seraph fighters closing in. "Can we fire a pulse transmission to inform the shuttle of a mine launch?"

"Too risky," Melissa replied with a slight shake of her head. "But you can generate a detectable detonation signal with a minimal countdown from the mine itself. It _could_ offer Spartan-458 enough warning." The AI tilted her chin. "What did you have in mind?"

* * *

><p>"Seraphs inbound."<p>

"I know," Nicole hissed through clenched teeth. She could easily see the green dots on the holo-globe off to her right coming around, but the route she was about to plot through the sea of freighters needed her full attention. Sure, she could have let Melissa pilot the shuttle back to _Eye of Karaan_ on her own, but Nicole had plenty of experience piloting various Covenant spacecraft. Even if only in

simulators.

Melissa's fragment did at least display a holographic overlay on the main viewport that showed the path of greatest cover while maintaining its proximity to the fastest route to their destination. "Oh, we have a change in plan," Melissa said matter-of-factly.

Tightening her grip on the awkward dual joystick controls, Nicole dove below the keel of a nearby freighter. "What? What's changed?"

"Just a new Navpoint." Melissa's statement was punctuated with a blue dot now glowing above _Eye of Karaan_'s docking bay. "And Brevet Captain Jokling is abandoning ship, just in case you cared about any personal items aboard the Corvette that will be vaporized during the ship's Self-Destruct."

Nicole swore under her breath. With the arrival of the Arbiter, things were beginning to spin completely out of control. "I can assume Greene's coming to pick us up?"

"That's the plan." The AI was silently observing the radar readout while Nicole straightened out the shuttle on a level plain with _Eye of Karaan_. "Our Seraph Fighter pursuit may not be willing to fire on a diplomatic ship, if they consider who might be on board. They will most likely attempt to herd us clear of the freighter cloud before they blast us to atoms."

Without warning, a quad burst of laser pulses shot across the shuttle's starboard side, causing Nicole to dive downward and corkscrew to port. Another volley, from a different angle, just missed the shuttle and hit one of the idle, unshielded freighters. The laser pulses ripped through the aft of the freighter and sent it tumbling through the formation of similar ships, bouncing off of a pair of freighters before detonating with a third. The brilliant explosion sent out a micro shockwave that Nicole could feel through the controls, as she turned the shuttle back on course with evasive maneuvers already in motion.

"Or they will determine us a threat and fire upon us," Melissa's fragment added nonchalantly.

* * *

><p>Arbiter Th'ul Vilumee stepped over the last Honor Guard's body, its wounds still fresh but blood pale, and entered the Minister of Conversion's chambers. It seemed the dying Guard had dragged himself from the security foyer toward the chambers only to bleed out before he could open the final door. Pitiful.

Th'ul had been wounded many times during his service to the Fleet, but now, as the Arbiter, this was his first assignment. And he felt the spotless, gleaming sliver armor he wore gave off the impression of inexperience with combat orâ€”_Forerunners forbid_â€”an unpronounced haughtiness. But in the end, it didn't matter to Th'ul. He had been branded and he knew his brothers in arms would follow him regardless of his past. He was the Arbiter, the Iron Fist of the High Council, and he would show them his devotion was immutable.

From the carpeted lounge floor, the Minister slowly rose to his knees, holding his unadorned head, not even acknowledging the new arrivals to his chambers. Two of the Arbiter's soldiers hurried over, pulled the San 'Shyuum to his feet, and clamped energy binders to his wrists. "What?" the Minister cried wearily. "What is the meaning of this?" He demanded, looked back and forth at the two Sangheili captors. "Do you know who I am?"

"Do you know who I am?" Th'ul asked, his voice booming through the chamber. He could visibly see the Minister slacken his shoulders, knowing the inevitable fate that awaited him.

"Arbiter," the San 'Shyuum breathed, finally looking up at him. "You are not here as reinforcements, are you?"

Th'ul snorted and walked over to the observation bubble along the bow wall, catching the faint smell of something oddly familiar in the air. "If not for someone else completely decimating your force, I would kill you right here and now," he said, waving his hand at the floating mass of debris outside. "It seems your devotees have already been punished, and I have been called to take you to the High Council for charges of Grand Treason." The Arbiter sniffed the air again, this time definitely detecting that odd metallic smell. "But I should know of who attacked you." He leaned in. "Or was it mutiny? Did you not inform your crew of your intentions?"

The Minister worked his jaw for a moment. "My followers are loyal to the cause."

"They are loyal to you!" Th'ul bit out. "If they were made fully aware of your plans for a Peace Treaty, you would have been shoved out the nearest airlock and your ship decommissioned from your lineage." He began to pace back and forth. "No, Minister. Your grand mission will end here and you will return with me to High Charity."

But the Minister didn't back down so easily. "But Humans deserve to hear the Truth. The gods demand it! If my missionary journey could be completed, I could end this war in a matter of months by bringing the Humans to reason."

"Don't speak blasphemy to me!" The Arbiter raised his hand to strike, but paused when the Minister held his defiant pose. He shows resilience. That's admirable. Th'ul smiled thinly. "Obviously, the Humans have given you their reply," he said gesturing outside again. "They launch a strike and run away like cowards." His expression soured. "Just like they always do." He shook his head to forgo a reply from the Minister. Th'ul was about to order his soldiers to head out, but the deck beneath him shuddered for a span of a few breathes, interrupting his hand signal.

Immediately the voice of his Shipmaster came over his comm. "Arbiter, we have a detonation. Energy signature suggests a human mine. A 'HORNET' mine, to be exact."

The Minister squirmed in his captors' grasp. "Eye of Karaan," he breathed. "They must haveâ€" "

"Where," Th'ul demanded, cutting off the Minister. He walked over to the holo-display in the lounge. The console detected his presence and

the display feed from _Consistent Rapture_ swam into view. The animation played out, and Th'ul could barely believe it.

The Shipmaster continued. "The mine detonated right in the middle of the freighter cluster, destroying most of them, and took four of our Seraphs out." He paused. "The fighters were pursuing a rogue shuttle that had left _Harrowing Faith_ without authorization. We believe it to still be intact."

His anger brewing inside, the Arbiter turned to one of his guards. "Head back to the Shuttle Bay and report." Activating his comm again, he closed his fists tightly. He had not thought the Human attackers would stick around after the initial attack, but their tactics rarely ever made sense to him. "Where are the Human ships now?"

"We . . . We cannot detect any other ships in the area," the Shipmaster said hesitantly.

With a gurgling growl, Th'ul drove both his fists down onto the display, crushing it completely. Sparks played out over his armor, and he was sure it added to the sinister look he gave the Minister. "Send out scout ships to the wreckage. Search this entire sector," he barked, his gaze still locked on the San 'Shyuum. "Take this traitor back to my ship."

As his captors complied, the Minister struggled in their collective grip. "But, _Eye of Karaan_ . . ."

"What about your only remaining, fully-intact Corvette?" Th'ul asked with narrowed eyes.

The Minister's eyes shifted slightly, as if contemplating a life decision. "Nothing. I'm sure you will take it as one of your own. It matters not what I say." A look of defiance flashed across his face, but he said nothing more.

With a point from Th'ul's finger and a shove from the two soldiers, the Minister was escorted out of his chambers for the last time.

The Arbiter's gaze returned to the holo-display reduced to so much junk. His mind began to race with possible outcomes to his current mission. Th'ul could just return to High Charity with the Minister and blast the remaining ships to dust, but battling against human forces was something he relished. _And the glory of a victorious ambush turned on its head would make for a memorable report_. "And disable that rouge shuttle. I want those Humans alive to tell us where exactly their ships are."

* * *

><p>Spartan-458 held on to the shaking controls, nearly ripping them from their sockets, when the blast-wave rolled over the tiny shuttle. Melissa had chimed off a warning klaxon, but still being in the thick of the freighter cloud made a straight shot to safety nearly impossible.<p>

Exploding freighters sent their own chunks of shrapnel spinning ahead, partially blocking her view, but Nicole corkscrewed to the right, narrowly avoiding a deteriorating compartment from the closest freighter still carrying enough energy to house working interior

lights. But when the chunk of dying ship spun around to expose the cargo bay, Nicole nearly froze at the controls.

Nearly a hundred meters away, pouring out from the bisected freighter, were dozens of coffin-sized pods. Some of them were fully intact; others had been torn open from other debris. And their contents were the last thing Nicole expected to see.

Dead human bodies.

Melissa spoke up, after manually overriding the controls to avoid another dying hulk from hitting their port side. "They are human colonists," she said in the most serious tone Nicole had ever heard her use. "Men, women, and . . . children."

The coffin-pods continued to spill out bodies, already cold from some form of cryo-preservation, and Nicole could clearly make out the mix of ages and gender even in the small pool she could see. Her stomach began to knot and ice flowed through her veins. "What does this mean?" she asked. "Why would they do this? Why have human bodies in transport freighters?"

Her voice began to break up, and she no longer held on to the controls, letting Melissa pilot the shuttle along the outer edge of the expanding freighter destruction. She no longer felt the shockwaves or the twisting motion of the maneuvers. Oddly enough, Nicole could only recall what the Minister had said to her in his chambers.

"_We do not seek war or conquest. We only seek to enlighten. We come to share a truth with you. I am here on my own accord, separate from the Prophets that you fight against."_

Nicole's head was about to spin into a long-term round of questions, but Melissa's voice interrupted her thoughts. "We're clear. Heading for Eye of Karaan's docking bay."

"Copy," the Spartan replied absently. She shook her head clear. "Pursuit?"

"None at the moment."

Focusing again on the shuttle's controls, Nicole tried to bury the confusion, anger, and sadness in the back of her mind.

18. Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Rolf Sorenson rounded the last hallway junction and entered the main Docking Bay. Eye of Karaan still held the backup generators and crates that Nagamo had left, and she hurried over to the nearest box labeled: ARMS. Her service pistol wouldn't be enough to stop Elite armor, she reasoned, and Rolf pulled out a single SMG, complete with three full magazines. She caught a furtive glance from Captain Jokling but proceeded to take up a position facing the main entrance.

Attempting to catch his breath, Professor Sorvad stumbled to another

crate and threw his briefcase on top of it. He opened the briefcase and activated the datapad link to the bridge. "Linking up now."

Jokling reached across Rolf's line of sight and pulled out another SMG. "Let me know when you have eyes in there." She waved the other crewmembers over and they each acquired an automatic weapon. "Spray and pray. Nothing fancy here, people. We just need to keep them off of us until help arrives."

"Link established," Sorvad called out.

Rolf, noticing other officers taking up defensive positions better than hers, headed over to the Professor with the Captain behind. On the small screen was a broad view of the bridge from the entryway. It showed several Elites with a dozen or so Grunts combing the consoles and displays. _Good luck finding anything_.

Jokling squinted. "They made it to the bridge already?" She mumbled something under her breath and pointed to the screen. "Can you seal the door behind them from here?"

Sorvad shook his head. "It wouldn't slow them down. On the bridge they can override anything."

As if to punctuate the statement, one of the datapad's windows flickered and flashed red. The cloaking algorithm had ceased, rendering Jokling's crew now unable to covertly communicate with the ONI forces in the area.

"Not Good." Jokling pursed her lips. "They'll soon realize that this ship was never really limping home. They probably have a master key or something for every ship."

"I still think we should have smashed all of the consoles with a tack hammer," Sorvad muttered.

"Physical damage would have been an obvious clue to sabotage."

"Didn't matter in the end," Rolf pointed out. She looked up at the Docking Bay petal doors and swore out loud. "Then how are we going to let our rescue in?" In all of the chaos leaving the bridge, they didn't expect the Covenant forces to take over the access of key functions of the ship so quickly.

"_Shit_." Jokling ran a hand threw her dark hair. "Maybe we should have left a portion of Melissa's fragment here."

Sorvad made a face. "The Protocol wouldn't allow it. Too risky."

"Then how are we going to get these doors open?" Rolf asked.

The Professor looked up, tracing the support columns with his gaze. "Let me look at something here." He pulled another datapad from the briefcase, this one larger and more durable-looking, and began to walk around the bay, waving the datapad in front of the columns.

Rolf looked back at the display of the bridge. "Well, make it quick, Professor, because it looks like we'll have company soon enough." She could see every member of the Covenant boarding party but two Grunts leave the bridge in an orderly march.

And they were heading straight for them.

* * *

><p>Galin Thorm exhaled slowly. He knew he had to leave. His ship was just waiting for a signal that everyone else had escape safely. But it seemed it was his own ship that needed to escapeâ€"and quickly. If the Covenant managed to capture any ONI personnel here, it might mean the end of the war. _If we didn't come here and disrupt this fleet, it would have happened anyway._

Nagamo, running on dangerously-low power levels to hide its energy signature, fired off another thruster to maintain its cover behind the burned out wreckage of one of the tankers.

"Scout ship inbound, Captain," Jovan said urgently from the AI pedestal.

"Hold steady. Weapons, prepare to fire on target."

On the sole display, the entire bridge crew watched the tracking data of a Seraph fighter's graceful arc over the largest section of the debris field where the tankers were destroyed. Galin gave the order, and once the recon Seraph came around, a single turret energized and fired. Like a sleeping dragon awakened by a gnat, the Covenant ship was reduced to exploding atoms in the blink of an eye.

"Hold steady," Galin ordered, raising his hand. There was a slim possibility that the Covenant would suspect their downed craft was hit by debris, or steered too close to a burning hull remnant, and would react with caution. There was also the possibility that _Nagamo_'s energy signature would leak through its hull and improvised protective cover.

The silence only lasted a few more seconds. Ardent laser fire raked the tanker debris field, vaporizing several of the larger chunks to metal globules while igniting a few floating canisters and sending those spinning off in all directions.

"That blast came from _Consistent Rapture_," Jovan informed. "It was a long-distance volley, but we are just asking for it sitting here."

Galin slowly blinked in reflection. "Let's move."

Instantly the ship came to life, and within the span of two deep breaths, _Nagamo_ rocketed away from its coverâ€"only still locking onto the giant slab of tanker debris, using it for continued cover. The space they had just occupied left a massive void, and soon, Seraph fighters were vectoring in.

"Get us clear, Jovan, then plot a course back to the Rally Point."

"Aye, Sir."

Nagamo swept across the edge of the tanker debris field, and Galin watched the sensor readouts on _Consistent Rapture_ change. It was preparing to fire once more. "On my mark, unlatch the cargo grapplers, Jovan." He turned to his right. "Helm, get us around the debris but keep the cover as much as possible." He gazed at the sensor data. "Mark!"

With a guttural growl, _Nagamo_ let go of its giant cover and pushed away on a perpendicular course. The second Covenant laser blast consumed the slab of tanker hull completely but several beams managed to continue on past. The helmsman twisted the Prowler perfectly, narrowly avoiding the blast, and pushed on past the debris field into clear space.

But before Galin could issue the order to jump, he looked out the main viewport and saw _Eye of Karaan_.

The sensors officer called out, "Message from _Eye of Karaan_!"

The cloaking algorithm was firing again and Jovan translated instantly. _"Our ship has been compromised. Self-Destruct activated and awaiting activation. EVAC requested at Docking Bay_."

The message made his heart sink. Kandis and her crew had the most risk of this entire mission and it seems it was coming down to an emergency pickup request. He was about to issue an order to take them around towards the distressing ship, but directly above the Corvette, Galin thought he saw a flicker of pseudo-motion in the outline of _Apocolypso_â€_EVAC_. His eyes flashed to the radar screen and he could see The Arbiter's ship beginning to shift from watching over _Karaan_ like a predatory hawk, to a position that put in on an intercept course with _Nagamo_.

"Greene has them," he breathed. His stomach tightened at the great vulnerability _Apocolypso_ was now in.

"Understood, Captain," Jovan prompted. "But if we are going to jump, we need to do it now."

"No," he said quietly. Galin felt the knot forming in his stomach grow tighter. "We have the enemy's attention, and I intend to keep it until Greene pulls out Kandis and her crew."

* * *

><p>Professor Sorvad pointed to the last generator. "Activate on my mark."<p>

Kandis nodded, then looked over to the far side of the bay and saw Sorenson wave. Her blonde hair shimmered in the overhead glowpanels as the younger woman squatted down to ready the switch. From her view, Kandis couldn't help but notice Rolf's petite, yet strong frame. Her gentle curves and fair skin made for quite an attractive sight. But Kandis shook her head and cleared her mind. She had been down that road before, and she was with Galin now.

Galin. Kandis felt a fresh wave of anxiety pour into the back of her thoughts. She knew the fling wasn't a lasting thing, but he still treated her with respect and valued her more than any guy or girl she

had been with before. And now, he was out there in a wounded ship. _Just get out of here safely, Galin. No heroic stuff_, she pleaded, with eyes closed.

"Ready . . ."

Sorvad's voice came distantly at first, but Kandis brought her head up alert. "Do it."

"Mark!" the professor yelled.

Simultaneously, the three generators were switched on and Kandis backed away from the crescendo hum of power. Sorvad had found a way to tap into the Docking Bay doors' power system by identifying the fluctuations in energy rising up through the half-dozen support columns. Using the generators to short out the control feeds from the bridge, they would in turn open the Bay doorsâ€"if they could muster enough power from the generators. And _that_ would certain get the attention of the Covenant boarding party.

Kandis noticed the pitch of all three generators hit the same note, a high G, and the giant petal-shaped Bay doors began to slowly part. "It's working!" she called out. Through the growing gap, Kandis saw a shape hovering just outside. "Wait, there's somethingâ€"

"C'mon, already. We've been dogging Seraphs out here for the good part of 5 minutes." Melissa's voice came over the comm unit in Kandis' ear.

"They're still out here," the Spartan quickly added. "Hurry it up."

The Bay doors were open just enough to allow the shuttle to pass through, when something exploded behind the shuttle, sending it tumbling end over end into the Docking Bay.

"Get clear!" Kandis yelled, and took cover behind her stanchion.

The air instantly filled with screeches and thuds as the shuttle crashed onto the center of the deck. When Kandis came around the pillar, she found the Covenant craft upside down and in flames at its aft. The shuttle was a mess, its steering vanes crumpled against the fuselage and the viewports were all blown out. Kandis had forgotten how flimsy Covenant ships were without shields. Grabbing the extinguisher reserved for the generator, Kandis rushed towards the crumpled cockpit.

But it was Sorvad that was there first, already putting out small fires in the cockpit. "Spartan," he called, coughing through the smoke. Rolf was there at his side in an instant, shifting a piece of metal off of a viewport.

Wordlessly, two armor-covered hands gripped the frame of the broken-out viewport and pulled the Spartan free of the cockpit. She reached back in, grabbed something, and handed it to Sorvad. When the professor held it up, Kandis saw what it was. It was the bent and charred AI fragment data chip.

"When we got hit, I tried to yank her out," the Spartan commented. "I should have just left her in."

Kandis opened her mouth to say something, but again, it was Sorvad there first. "It's only a fragment."

"No, she's right," Kandis said. "Melissa could have wiped any trace of herself before the fire got her. When we activate the self-destruct, any data left will be destroyed." She set the extinguisher down. "But I'm glad you made it, Spartan."

Nicole stood straighter, but bent slightly to her right. "What's our status?"

Kandis now noticed the charred armor along the Spartan's right side, but it didn't seem to warrant the super soldier to ask for a medic. Kandis waved all of them away from the wreckage and they gathered near a stack of crates that had been moved together for adequate cover from the main entrance. "_Apocolypso_" should be here anyâ€"

Interrupting her reply was the very thing she was predicting. Still fully cloaked, the sleek Prowler descended through the now-fully-opened Bay Doors and onto the deck, doing well to stay clear of the shuttle wreckage. A portion of its keel faded into existence and revealed the lower boarding ramp. The exhaust jets nearly put out the remaining shuttle fires, and a sandstorm of debris washed over nearly everyone.

"Let's move!" Kandis yelled out. She slapped the Spartan on the back and moved past her. Kandis ran over to the officers standing guard at the bay entrance. "Let's go, let's go!" She patted the shoulders of each man and woman and waved them on in her wake. When they were halfway to the ramp, she turned back and watched the entryway.

The bay's main entrance doors were beginning to flash their tell-tale opening sequence. "Double-time!" she ordered. Kandis stole a glance forward and saw the Spartan rushing back, her assault rifle at the ready.

"Go!" Nicole yelled. "I'll watch your back." She raised her rifle to fire, but an earth-shattering vibration and a brilliant explosion at the bay's entryway sent nearly everyone to the ground.

Captain Greene's voice came over Kandis' comm unit. "We have you covered; now hurry up and get inside!"

Kandis worked her jaw to minimize the ringing in her ear, and looked back at the entrance doorsâ€"or what was left of them. Using one of its forward turrets, "_Apocolypso_" had reduced the bay's entryway to so much rubble. Clouds of dust were already billowing out through the magnetic containment field above, and there was no chance the Covenant boarding party could get past the blockade.

Grabbing the back of his shirt, Kandis pulled the nearest officer up onto his feet and headed for the ramp. Shaking her head clear of the ringing, she stepped onto the ramp and into the UNSC ship. Looking back, she saw the Spartan bringing up the rear of the last three officers to get on board. Inside the ship, she noticed Sorvad and Sorenson helping the slightly dazed officers deeper into the safety of the Prowler.

The two security officers just outside, flanking the ramp, hopped in and hit the control panel. Before the ramp was even sealed completely, _Apocolypso_ lifted off.

The Prowler broke through the magnetic containment field, maintaining its active camouflage, and pulled away from _Eye of Karaan_.

19. Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Arbiter Th'ul stepped onto his bridge and pointed off to his side where the guards threw the Minister to the deck. "Now you will see the proper way to deal with the Human Filth before us." He looked up and barked, "Status!"

A fellow Sangheili standing next to the floating command chair cleared his throat. "Reconnaissance craft spotted something lurking in the debris field in quadrant 4-F. The Seraph was destroyed and we focused our cannons in that direction."

"And you took upon yourself to attack without notifying me?" Th'ul bit out. Things were quickly spinning out of his control.

But the Sangheili made a face of confusion. "You were just coming on board, Arbiter. The time it would have taken to call you over the ship's communications eddy could haveâ€" "

"Fine," he said with a wave of his hand. "Where is the human ship now?" Th'ul asked, walking toward the center of the bridge.

The hologlobe illuminated the battlefield with his request. The UNSC ship was traversing through the debris field left by the giant refuelers, and the Seraph fighters were regrouping to vector in. Everything else looked to be as he had left it . . . but movement near _Eye of Karaan_ caught his eye. He reached out and the view zoomed in to reveal the shuttle that had left _Harrowing Faith_ and was now holding steady above _Eye of Karaan_. "Why hasn't this shuttle been captured?" he demanded.

But as the crew worked up an excuse, a Seraph recon flight swooped up from underneath _Eye of Karaan_ and fired upon the shuttle's engines. The small craft tumbled into the opening bay of the Corvette and disappeared inside. The Seraphs veered away and regrouped with the cluster forming to attack the human ship.

"At last, one of my orders gets carried out." He keyed his comm. "_Eye of Karaan_, secure that shuttle and its crew. Report once you have done so."

There was no reply.

He tried again with the same result. "Have you heard anything from the boarding party?" Th'ul asked his Ship Master.

Keeping up with his usual line of disrespect, the Ship Master had been silent this entire time, only now offering a cursory glance in his direction. Ever since the High Council had claimed _Consistent Rapture_ as the Arbiter's ship, its Ship Master had proved to be an

energy restraint to nearly every move Th'ul had made. His last threat had only brought his new adversary into passiveness.

"The Phantom's pilot is relaying reports from the bridge." The command chair spun around and the armor-clad Sangheili stepped over to the Arbiter. "The Corvette, it appears, has already been compromised. It seems their cloaking system was never faulty to begin with. Their communications have been intentionally disabled and we are waiting to hear from the Phantom that docked with _Eye of Karaan_ about an explosion they felt."

"Compromised? Disabled?!" Th'ul felt the back of his throat begin to burn. He spun on his hoof and faced the source of his anger: the Minister. _How long had the Humans been in control of the Corvette? Has this Minister been in league with our enemies this whole time?_

"You knew about this!" the Arbiter called out to the Minister. "You knew _Eye of Karaan_ had been overtaken by humans, and yet you said nothing?"

A smirk crept onto the Minister's face. "I tried, but you refused to listen to reason. One of their Demons confronted me personally; hijacked my own personal shuttle and marched right into my chambers. They arrived with _Eye of Karaan_, though I do not know how long the Corvette has been in their hands. Days, perhaps months." He motioned back to the hologlobe. "And now they appear to be running like the 'cowards' you claim them to be." He leaned in, and whispered. "And your chance for glory will end in bringing this cynical 'harrower of the faith' to judgment." The Minister shook his head. "I have no regrets, Arbiter. My mission could have brought untold submission and truth to a species rampant with conflict." He looked to the guards standing nearby. "You may take me away."

"Demon?" the Ship Master asked, not fully believing it. His face looked genuinely concerned for the first time since they had left High Charity.

The Arbiter felt his stomach turn to ice and his heart felt as if it would leap up and out of his mouth. Anger burned, not necessarily at the human enemy, but for being deceived by so many at once. He stepped to the Minister, exhaling loudly and feeling his blood boil. "I promise you, the Council will have only pieces to interview after I get through with you. I will hold you directly responsible for the loss of your fleet." He even smiled. "Remove him."

There was silence as the Arbiter watched the two guards escort the Minister off the bridge. The hologlobe was rife with activity, but he paid it no attention. He had been betrayed before, and that led him to be where he was now: in Arbiter armor, and on defector-retrieval duty. He had vowed never again to let those that cross him sink him down any further. And yet, the Minister had defied him, spoke blasphemy, and hid vital information from him. _It will be a long ride home for you, Minister._

It wasn't until the doors closed behind the guards that the Sangheili ensign spoke up. "Orders, Arbiter?"

Th'ul turned around, his eyes slowly settling on _Eye of Karaan_. He

saw the group of Seraph fighters trailing the larger UNSC ship, which was miraculously using the battlefield to its advantage, weaving through the debris fields and taking pot-shots. He exhaled slowly. "Secure Eye of Karaan. Search the entire ship, and bring the pilot of that shuttle to me. I want that Demon to know who is responsible for its capture."

"And bring us about," he added, with a soft voice and a lift of his index digit. "Fire at will on that human vessel. Prisoners are not considered necessary."

* * *

><p>Galin held on to the arms of his command chair as Nagamo was put through maneuvers it was never intended to endure for such a drawn-out period. Firing its turrets again, a Seraph fighter's shields collapsed, and it veered away, only to crash into the hull of a dead, burned-out Covenant Corvette.

"Hull integrity is compromise, Captain," Jovan alerted. "We are venting atmosphere."

"Seal it off and keep us ahead of that mass of fighters." Despite the gravity generators, Galin could feel the corkscrew twist through the final debris field. He had plotted a course through the outer edges of the various clusters of debris clouds, and it had paid off. Consistent Rapture had fired numerous times, finding its target difficult to make out through all of the fragmented hulls, and only to strike Nagamo once. But it was a crippling blow, causing the reactor to short out three of its transformers and disabling the portside turrets. The Seraphs were slowly eating away Nagamo's armored hull, and the Arbiter's ship was closing in.

It all made mathematical sense to Galin. On board, Nagamo had only 45% of the ONI personnel, while Apocolypso had the rest, including a civilian and a Spartan. The time and space needed for Greene's Prowler to jump was greater and so he had to lead the enemy away from her. It was a quasi-fatalistic way of viewing things, but it had to be done. He spared a survey of his bridge and wondered if his crew would blame him personally for their deaths if the Covenant pursuit finally succeeded.

Amanda Greene's voice came over the comm. "Captain Thorm, get clear."

Galin's eyes fixed on the radar display. Greene was calling from the far side of the engagement zone: a safe distance away. His heart leaped. "Are you all okay? Everyone aboard?"

"Yes, now get out of here. Start the countdown and we'll jump together." Greene's voice carried both professionalism and personal plea.

Sitting up a little straighter, Galin nodded to the AI pedestal. "You heard the lady, get our FTL drive spinning."

Jovan held up a hand. "We have a problem, sir. Our reactor damage is more severe than initially estimated. We may not have enough power to achieve full Slipstream capacity for very long."

"What exactly does that mean, Jovan?" Galin asked, trying to stay calm through another banking maneuver.

"Our destination cannot be guaranteed."

"Galin, what is Jovan talking about?" Greene demanded. "We're about to self-destruct _Eye of Karaan_ and leave . . . _now_."

A blast from _Rapture_ vaporized the spinning hull of another corvette right in front of _Nagamo_. _There is no other choice_. "Jovan, do it anyway. We just need to make it to the Rally Point and then we can assess our drive's condition."

The AI nodded solemnly. "Very well."

Despite the ship's continued twists and turns before the final leveling out, the bridge was completely silent. The crew was collectively holding its breath.

"Five, Four, Three . . . "

* * *

><p>When the countdown reached its end and Nagamo had cleared the blast zone, the self-destruct signal was emitted from the comm unit housed inside the robust briefcase of Professor Lazlo Sorvad. There was no chance of failure, no means in which the Covenant could disable it. The link had been set up to directly bypass the bridge controls and activate at the reactor core itself.

The effect was instantaneous. The brilliant white-pink flash emanated from the aft end of _Eye of Karaan_ and blossomed out to engulf the entire ship. There was no explosion sequence, only pure energy expanding and consuming the Corvette in a matter of seconds. The hull was vaporized along with any trace of humans every being aboard.

The expanding cloud of destruction reached the nearest ship, _Harrowing Faith_, before the crew even realized that Melissa's AI fragment had rendered its Slipspace drive non-operational. Like a planetoid caught too close to an exploding sun, the Frigate was utterly torn apart by the sphere of devastation. The Minister of Conversion's command ship was gone.

Several Seraph fighters were caught unprepared, their shields doing little to stop the wash of all-consuming energy. Like chaff in a brushfire, the debris fields were burned up, due to their proximity to the blast.

The Ship Master aboard _Consistent Rapture_ had experienced such a sight before, and took the necessary action to preserve his ship, instantly pulling away and getting clear. Slipspace travel wasn't necessarily needed, as the energy was dying off from the reactor blast. The unlucky Frigate and the multiple debris fields only fueled the initial explosion, and once it had consumed all it could, there was only the Covenant Destroyer left in the entire sector.

Gone was the UNSC Prowler that was desperately staving off its pursuit, and there was no trace of the source of the human transmission that the Covenant intercepted just before the destruction of _Eye of Karaan_.

The Arbiter was left with nothing but his captive to bring before the High Council. Even with such a prize, it would be difficult to explain the loss of an entire resource fleet by the intervention of human hands.

* * *

><p>Captain Greene held her breath as Apocolypso leapt forward into the black void of the Slipstream. She waited almost a minute before asking Melissa, "Status?"

The AI appeared at the pedestal by her side. "Successful activation of the Corvette's self-destruct. All UNSC hands were aboard _Apocolypso_ and accounted for. We'll be arriving at the Rally Point in approximately 30 minutes." The yellow avatar leaned in. "Our delayed departure after the countdown had ended, as per your request, did reveal _Nagamo_ successfully achieve slipspace travel. But the energy readings from our sensors showed a slight anomaly in the Slipstream, possibly a double tear."

Greene felt her gut go cold. A 'double tear' was half fact and half theoretical. When a FTL drive activates with a helix-stall, it can in effect render two paths for the vessel to take. In some cases, splitting the ship in half and sending them to two different places. Other times, it had been recorded to throw and pull the vessel back like a boomerang, only to arrive later in time. Cutting through slipspace was not an elegant thing, Amanda had been explained, and without achieving the proper thresholds necessary, unpredictability ensued.

They only had to wait and see if _Nagamo_ would be there when they arrived at the Rally Point.

"Jovan will get them to safety, ma'am," Melissa offered. "He's very good at astronavigation."

Amanda nodded wordlessly and got up from her command chair. She started for the exit, her steps a little unsteady, and set off to greet the crew they had rescued from _Eye of Karaan_.

Still gathered in the cargo hold, the team from _Eye of Karaan_ looked exhausted but surprisingly good-spirited. It was the genuine emotion felt after surviving a brush with death. Amanda saw the Spartan first, her head above most everyone, and she made for the cluster of people surrounding her.

Kandis Jokling turned to greet Greene first and offered a salute. "Ma'am."

"Captain," Amanda greeted in return. "It worked. The Corvette detonated as planned, and we're en route to the Rally Point."

"What about _Nagamo_, Captain?" Jokling asked.

Amanda forced a smile. "They jumped to Slipspace. We should see them at the meet-up."

At the mention of _Nagamo_, Sorvad, Sorenson, and the Spartan focused on Greene. Professor Sorvad nodded. "We all made it, then."

"Maybe not." Beside him, Nicole took off her helmet and raked her gloved hand through her short, black hair. Her face was pale, and her gaze was downcast. "Something's very wrong with this Covenant fleet," she said, her voice barely audible over the buzz of activity by the medtechs combing over the injured officers. "Those smaller freighters slaved to _Harrowing Faith_? They were transporting dead human bodies in cryo-pods." She looked up, her eyes vacant. "There must have been hundreds of them."

"My God," Sorvad exclaimed.

Greene felt her jaw drop. "What? The Covenant was moving human corpses around?"

Beside the Spartan, Rolf breathed, "there's something else." When the others all looked at her, she brought her head up. "The blast from the refueling tankers was much too big to be Covenant fuel. It had to have been N2H4â€”_Human_ fuel. Why would they bring our dead and our own fuel to stage an invasion fleet?"

"And there was something the San 'Shyuum said to me," the Spartan added. "He mentioned that they didn't want a fight in the first place, that they wanted to 'enlighten' us. Saying that he was here on his own accord." She shook her head. "It didn't make sense at first, but now . . . "

Rolf shuffled her feet. "Think about it. The Minister of Conversion apparently comes peacefully, transporting our own fuel and cryogenically frozen human corpses."

"A peace offering." Sorvad's statement was punctuated with a nod of his head. "That's what it was. He was hoping for a peace summit of sorts."

Rolf opened her hands and looked up, astonished. "He wasn't trying to set up a Resource Fleet; he fed that information to his scout ships to diminish suspicion. His own fleet wouldn't have gone along with his plan, so he had to disguise it."

"But why?" Greene asked, trying to quickly understand the ramifications of such a claim. "They sure as hell wanted _Nagamo_ blown to bits."

"That was the Arbiter's ship," Rolf explained. "He was probably sent here to track down the Minister's fleet."

Amanda frowned. "I'm still having a hard time believing all of this. It's a lot of conjecture." When she saw Rolf's mouth open to retort, she held up a hand. "Let's catch our breath first and then file our reports. I'm sure we can piece together everything once we get the intel from Galin's crew and ship." As the medtechs moved past her, she sighed. "You should all get checked out, too, just to be safe."

Her expression shifted to somber pride. "But I can't begin to tell you all how impressed I am with your actions in this mission. Regardless of the Minister's reasons, we staved off a possible threat to UNSC territory and lived to tell about it." There was more to say, without a doubt, but the medtechs were beginning to escort the _Eye

of Karaan_ crew to the medbay. Even the Spartan, who looked mildly discomfited, began to move in their wake.

"Thank you," was all she could think to add.

20. Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Nicole rotated her right shoulder, wincing at the pain, and stepped aside for the passage of a medical team heading into the medbay. Everyone that had been aboard _Eye of Karaan _was now getting thoroughly checked out and examined. A few officers had scuffs and cuts while most suffered from auditory ailments and dizziness. Checking her armor's medical diagnostics again, Nicole knew she had to plug in somewhere and make sure she wasn't bleeding internally. The pain was becoming increasingly worse.

"Spartan, over here," a familiar voice called. In the vaulted room, along the back wall, Professor Sorvad was holding a datapad and a medkit complete with a cable to link up to her armor.

She walked over and wanted to sit down, but thought better of it and stood. "Thanks," she said, and took the connector cable from his hand.

"They have these stashed away in storage and I knew you had been wounded." Sorvad activated the link and data filled his screen. "Severe burns along your right side," he informed, reading the information. He looked up, his expression concerned. "Take a deep breath."

She did and had to cough through it when the pain spread to her lungs.

"Broken ribs, too." He shook his head. "This isn't a quick patch-and-go job, Spartan. You'll need to see a medtech."

Nicole's face soured and then sobered. She had never been wounded this badly in combat. In training she had suffered a broken arm, but nothing that ever made her uncomfortable to stand in any position. "I guess the crash landing didn't help."

Sorvad waved a tech over. "Your armor shorted out around the burn, and you must have injured yourself further in the crash." When the tall, lanky man took the datapad from Sorvad, he instantly called out for more medtechs to help.

Sorvad backed away, smiled, and turned to go.

Nicole wanted to thank him out loud, but since her adrenaline had subsided, she was feeling the full effect of her injuries. Her breath was labored.

"We'll need to get your armor off ASAP." The lead tech started to work, getting the rest of his team in motion, while Nicole wanted nothing more than to be rid of the alarming amount of pain she had found herself enduring for appearances' sake.

She handed them her helmet and they instantly stuck her with an injection. Nicole felt her world drift off into nothingness, and the pain vanished with the light.

* * *

><p>"It's been over four hours, ma'am," Melissa said apologetically from the bridge AI pedestal.<p>

Amanda watched Kandis out of the corner of her eye. Her long black hair tied up in a loose bun, the Brevet Captain was unmoving. "Check our sensors. Run the diagnostics again," Amanda said.

Melissa's voice was surprisingly gentle. "Our sensors are functioning properly, Captain." She paused. "If _Nagamo_ hasn't arrived here by now, it may never . . . "

Kandis, who had been still as a stone for the better part of an hour, turned to face Amanda. "She's right," Kandis said, her eyes red from lack of sleep and dried tears. "We have no way of knowing."

Amanda wondered what Galin would do if their positions had been reversed. The safety of his crew was something he held onto dearly, and yet he had always treated those he called friends the same. She had known Galin a long time and couldn't imagine him being killed in action by a slipspace anomaly. _Of all the stupid things to happen. If he was going to go, it should have been by the enemy's doing_.

She sighed. Melissa had already warned against heading back to the battlefield, and with each passing minute, the possibility that the Covenant Destroyer would find them increased. Amanda locked eyes with Kandis once more and received an abbreviated nod. She could clearly see that there had been something intimate going on between Galin and Kandis, that was made obvious by her current state, but to accept the fate of a lover departed and keep an air of collectiveness spoke highly of Kandis' character.

"It's okay, Captain," Kandis said. "I understandâ€”_Galin_ understands." She stood and smoothed her uniform over her stomach. "Let's head home."

As Kandis Jokling walked out of the bridge, Amanda closed her eyes and silently nodded to Melissa. "You heard the lady. Get our FTL drive spinning."

* * *

><p>Rolf Sorenson stepped into the steaming shower and embraced the comfort of hot water flowing down her back. It had been a few long days since she had felt clean and the bruising for her earlier encounter had been fully healed, allowing the warmth of the environment to sooth her mind as well. It had been a harrowing mission, one that she still needed to gather all of her thoughts around, but for now, she just wanted to relax.<p>

Her peace only lasted for a few minutes before a knock on her cabin's door interrupted the sounds of the shower. _Great_. She sighed and shut off the water. "Who is it?"

The muffled voice answered but Rolf couldn't understand it.

Audibly sighing her frustration, she stepped out of the shower and donned on a white robe. She tied it tight around her waist and stepped to the door, not yet opening it. "Who is it?" she asked again, leaning in.

"It's Kandis."

Frowning, Rolf keyed the door release. The taller woman looked absolutely downcast. Her blue eyes were red-rimmed and she was still in her uniform from their time aboard Eye of Karaan. Expecting her to reek of alcohol, Rolf was surprised that the Brevet Captain was sure of her footing when she stepped inside the cabin. "Can I help you?" Rolf asked.

"Captain Greene said we could share this cabin, if that's alright with you," she said absently. Kandis ran a hand over her face; tiredness made her look much older than she was. Although in her mid twenties, Kandis had a very confident vibe of some ONI veterans she had come across.

It was an alluring trait.

"I guess that's okay," Rolf finally replied, wondering if Kandis had even heard her.

Kandis walked over to the desk chair on the inner wall of the cabin and sat down. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees, crossing her fingers in the process. Her pose didn't last long, and she bent down further to unlace her boots. She attempted to kick off her right boot by stepping on the heel with her left toe, but growled in frustration when she was unsuccessful. She angrily pulled off her right boot with her hands and threw it hard against the far wall, nearly denting the dresser panel.

Rolf jumped minutely, but watched curiously. Kandis, if she had read the signs correctly, had just lost someone very dear to her—"hell, she just lost the entire crew she had served with for God-knows how long". Her reaction to the state she now found herself in was completely justified to Rolf.

She frowned. Kandis' leadership aboard the Corvette had been exemplary, but now she was beginning to peel away that persona of being fully in control of a situation. Even if momentarily.

Kandis buried her head in her hands. She didn't cry outright, but Rolf could hear her sniffing.

Rolf started to walk over to Kandis when the black-haired woman brought her head up, resting her chin on her fingertips. Kandis looked straight ahead and asked, "wanna fuck?"

With the awkward request made, Kandis turned her head and looked at Rolf. "You're down for that sort of thing, right?"

Taken aback by the question and the follow up comment, Rolf froze in place. "What?" She suddenly felt uncomfortable in her robe and tied it tighter around her. "Are you serious?"

"Look, Rolf, I just had my entire life turned upside down," Kandis began, her voice slightly breaking up. "I lost my best friend and lover, my crew, and my home ship. So sorry if I sound selfish for wanting to feel _something_ good when I've just been given a shit hand in life."

Rolf didn't know what to say. She was never good with handling emotional people; she didn't even know how to process her own emotions in a healthy manner. Kandis needed an emotional connection, she was certain, but Rolf knew she was the last person that should offer that to Kandis. It wasn't that she was not attracted to Kandis, but the ramifications of experiencing a moment of passion to ease a troubled mind felt wrong to Rolf.

What am I saying? This isn't like me at all! Rolf shook her head and frowned. _What_ _is so different now?_ Before, with Nicole, Rolf wanted nothing more than to take that fragile Spartan and show her a moment of absolute euphoria like she had never experienced. But with Kandis, Rolf would be the object of use, and it felt . . . wrong, somehow. _Is this how Nicole must have felt?_

"Rolf, I'm not asking for a relationship here," Kandis added. She rose from the chair, her voice growing slightly more desperate. "I just need this moment." Her expression soured. "Hell, I'd sleep with that medtech if I knew he wouldn't write me up. I'm only asking for a favor here."

Rolf could see the honesty in Kandis' eyes, and she was torn. She wanted to say something profound, like a train psychiatrist would proclaim, but she could think of nothing. Of all the things Rolf was: aggressor, passionate, opportunistically-timid . . . she wasn't strong with words or able to talk with those that were. Leadership wasn't on her career list of things-to-do, and even her stint as Brevet Second Officer wouldn't last. Sure, she had helped win the battle, but being in charge of personnel wasn't her thing.

"I just need this moment," Kandis whispered, this time taking a step toward Rolf.

Maybe I do too. Rolf then realized that this was what she knew best. Sex was something she was good at and it was her primary coping mechanism. It may have seemed crude to others, but in a way, it was a healing act that could be shared with someone else. The words came easy in her mind and it made absolute sense to her.

With full justification, Rolf nodded in agreement.

Kandis moved forward quickly, but paused right in front of Rolf. Her mouth moved, as if to say something, but instead she tilted her head slightly to the right and slowly kissed Rolf's lips once.

She tasted sweet, and Rolf watched Kandis' face search her own. They both had deep blue eyes, but Kandis' were a little brighter now. They kissed again, and then again.

As Rolf untied her robe, Kandis moved her hands up to gently grab the back of Rolf's neck. She then ran her fingers through Rolf's wet hair, and pulled her closer. They kissed even more passionately, allowing lust to fuel their moves. Rolf started to remove her partner's belt and slacks, while Kandis kicked off her remaining

boot.

Kandis pulled apart her uniform top, the snap buttons coming apart with ease, and quickly tossed it aside. The white tank-top was see-through enough for Rolf to make out the blue sports bra underneath.

The belt was finally free, and Rolf slid Kandis' pants down to her ankles, allowing her to step out of them. But Rolf remained low and began to kiss Kandis on her right thigh. She started a path that moved to her left thigh and upward, only to venture into the most sensual part of the female body.

Kandis held Rolf's head in place and moaned in instant pleasure, while Rolf's hands gripped Kandis' bare buttocks. After several minutes, Kandis lifted Rolf's head up and kissed her fully on the lips. As Rolf threw off her robe, Kandis pulled off her tank top and bra in one swift motion.

Rolf's eyes fixed on Kandis' ample chest. Wearing the regulation clothing, Rolf didn't realize how large Kandis was. But Kandis turned Rolf around and pressed against her back, allowing hands from both of them to touch and feel around to stimulate one another.

Hands groping, and lips touching, they soon found themselves lost in the sheets on Rolf's unkempt bed. Kandis was aggressive, yet gentle, while Rolf allowed her to take control. It was one of the most freeing things for Rolf, to not be in command of the act. She had never experience a sexual encounter like this, being one that was responding to every nuance that Kandis offered. And that only fueled the passion.

They both felt the moment coming quickly and Rolf could sense Kandis wanting to climax. Simultaneously, they both cried out in absolute pleasure, not caring if the cabin next to them could hear, and tried to make it last as long as possible. But soon their bodies had all they could take, and Rolf relaxed her muscles and rolled onto her back, breathing heavily.

Kandis, sweat dripping down her forehead, propped herself up on her elbow next to Rolf. She kissed the blonde woman's shoulder and softly rubbed Rolf's stomach with her free hand.

Rolf didn't say anything, and neither did Kandis. It was lust, pure and simple. But in the back of her mind, Rolf couldn't help but wonder if she had made a larger realization about herself. Regardless of her life choices, there were times when she couldn't be in complete control of her destiny.

And sometimes those moments meant offering control to another.

Rolf took a deep breath, feeling stronger emotionally, and kissed Kandis on the lips one last time before heading back to the shower. She looked back when she was in the bathroom doorway.

Kandis was content and smiling at her.

But Rolf smiled back and motioned for her to follow, already wanting her again. Kandis scooted to the edge of the bed and started for her. When they joined hands, Rolf knew Kandis wanted her again too.

* * *

><p>The main galley was nearly empty when Nicole walked in towards the end of suppertime. She wore regulation fatigues and a cap with no rank insignia visible. Before she could survey a place to sit after getting her food, a voice called out from the corner of the room.<p>

"Over here," Professor Sorvad half bellowed, but the other officers and ONI personnel paid him no attention.

Belaying her meal, she walked over and sat down across from Sorvad. "Hello, Professor."

He laughed lightly. "Please, call me Laszlo." He set aside his empty tray. "How are you feeling?"

Nicole automatically felt her right side and smiled. "Much better, thank you. I'm even off my meds."

"That's terrific," he said, maintaining his smile.

She leaned in. "The medtech said your quick thinking saved me a dunk in the tank. So, thank you, again. If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know, Laszlo."

Sorvad waved his hand. "It was nothing, really. I was just happy to be there to help." He lowered his head and made a face. "I'm sure one day I'll need a Spartan to save me from something awful, and you will be the first one on my list to call."

"Deal," Nicole said with a nod. She sat up and looked over to the shrinking line near the food dispensers. She still had a few more minutes. "Have you filed your reports yet?"

He nodded. "I'm leaving room for an addendum, though. Without _Nagamo_'s sensory data, we're left with combing over the information we pulled from _Eye of Karaan_. And that may take months to analyze."

"But you agree that we may have attacked a friendly convoy?" Nicole asked with whispered care. "That's what the rumors going around suggest."

Sorvad half frowned. "You were there. You were the one that saw the freighters' cargo. What do you think?"

Nicole shook her head. "I'm no analyst. The things the Covenant do rarely make sense to me." She tilted her head contemplatively. "But from everything I can piece together in my head, we defended ourselves. _I_ defended myself."

The Professor slowly nodded. "Then you have your answer. Sometimes no matter what the reports say, we can only judge ourselves according to what we deem is rightful action in the moment. Don't forget that, Spartan."

"Copy that, Professor," she replied with a smile. She stood to finally get some food. "And Laszlo?"

"Yes, Nicole?"

"Thank you for talking with me," she said. Nicole spread her arms wider and felt genuine peace. "I've learned so much about myself on this mission and I owe a lot of that to you."

Sorvad leaned back and nodded. "You're quite welcome."

Nicole gave another smile. Since the start of her solo missions, she had felt so disconnected to those around her, even her fellow Spartans. But now, she knew that it was a two-way street. Opening up to Sorvad and allow him to offer advice made her realize that. And it felt great.

When she headed to the end of the food line, she looked back and saw Sorvad typing on his datapad almost absently. Nicole was sure he had other things to do, but he appeared to be making himself available. Getting a few nutrient bars and a water bottle, she returned to her seat across from the Professor and enjoyed another round of conversation.

21. Epilogue

Epilogue

Captain Amanda Greene donned on her service cap and headed out into the lobby of the ONI Military Tribunal Court on Reach. The marbled floors made her steps echo through the cavernous space, and the clatter from behind her meant someone was attempting to catch up with her.

Rolf Sorenson scrambled off the lobby bench and joined Amanda at her side. "So? What was the verdict?"

"There's no verdict, just a ruling."

"Don't try to deflect with semantics." Rolf stepped around and stopped Amanda in her tracks. "What did they say?"

"The actions we took were deemed appropriate and forthright," she replied, finally meeting Rolf's gaze. "They said, 'despite the loss of Nagamo and her crew, Apocolypso proved resourceful and performed valiantly.'"

Rolf frowned. "So that's good news, right?"

Amanda rolled her eyes and stepped around Rolf and heading for the exit. The hot afternoon sun greeted her eyes painfully and she lowered the brim of her cap. But Rolf was insistent and followed her down the steps to the sidewalk.

"Captain, what is wrong?"

Sighing, Amanda stopped in front of a bench just off the main walkway and sat. Rolf, regal in her naval skirt and choosing to stand, gave her an expectant look. "I told them the truth," Amanda finally said. "I brought up the reports from Spartan-458 and the data logs from Eye of Karaan, and they still agreed we were correct in following

our hunch to the very end."

"So how is that a bad thing?" Rolf folded her arms across her chest. "Wait a minute. Part of you wanted to be reprimanded."

Amanda shrugged. "Maybe." But Rolf had hit the nail on the head. She couldn't help but feel survivor's guilt for making it out alive when Galin didn't.

"Don't hold on to that," Rolf offered. "it's not healthy."

They were silent for a while, allowing the ruling to sink in, and Rolf finally sat down beside her. "Where do you think we'll be stationed next?" Rolf asked, partially changing the subject.

"From the look Admiral Kane gave me, I doubt we'll be assigned anything for a while, and even when we do, it will be something like retrieving long-range comm buoys or something." Amanda sighed. "I guess I'll take that as punishment." She shrugged. "I was kind of hoping for something more immediate or severe. I don't know." She got up from the bench and took off her cap. "If I replay the entire mission in my head with the opposite outcome, I can only see it play out to where the Covenant land on our back doorstep."

"Right, so what we did was justified."

"And what if the Minister of Conversion was offering a peace treaty? How many human lives could have been saved?"

"Don't start down that path either, Captain." Rolf stood and placed a hand on Amanda's shoulder. "If the Covenant truly wanted a peaceful solution to this war, they would stop glassing every colony they find."

While not entirely believing her statement, Amanda did nod in reply. "Right." Her head was full of cloudy and muddy thoughts and she just wanted to get lost in something else. "Let's go, Lieutenant," she said, pointing out her new rank insignia.

Rolf frowned, not entirely thrilled with the promotion, and adjusted her name placard above her left breast pocket. "Where to, ma'am?"

"A bar. You owe me a drink."

Rolf gave Amanda a nonchalant salute. "Aye, aye, Captain."

* * *

><p>Date: Unknown
Location: Unknown
>UNSC Nagamo, Prowler_-class_

When Nagamo finally exited the Slipstream, its crew was vacant from the bridge. The interior temperature of the ship had dropped to below freezing and the gravity generators were currently not active. Datapads, documents, personal items, silverware, mugs and bedding floated aimlessly through the halls, as if haunting the ship in partial glowpanel lighting.

At the core of the Prowler, the emergency cryo-pods held the last remaining crewmembers of Nagamo. Down to only a handful of

survivors, the last few pods began their slow-thaw process. The AI pedestal in the Cryo Room attempted to flicker to life, but Jovan did not appear.

Several of the pods malfunctioned halfway through their cycle and their occupants perished in a matter of seconds.

Only three cryo pods remained intact.

As warmth and gravity returned to the Cryo Room, Captain Galin Thorm spilled out onto the deck, struggling against a continuous wracking cough and shivering uncontrollably. Blinking his eyes several times before fully opening them, Galin struggled to his feet and only succeeded in getting to his knees.

"Jovan," he half coughed. "Jovan, are you there? What is our status?"

The AI's voice came over the comm slowly. "_Unknown_."

"How long have we been in cryo?"

"_Unknown_."

Galin got to his feet, steadying himself by leaning against the pod opposite to him. "Where in the hell are we?"

"_Unknown_."

Confusion and frustration at the lack of knowledge from his AI turned to outright fear. So many horrible things had happened since they left for the Rally Point to meet up with _Apocolypso_, and he wasn't sure the nightmare was over yet. "Jovan, are we safe?"

The AI, its voice now nearly two octaves below normal gave a sigh.

"_No_."

End
file.